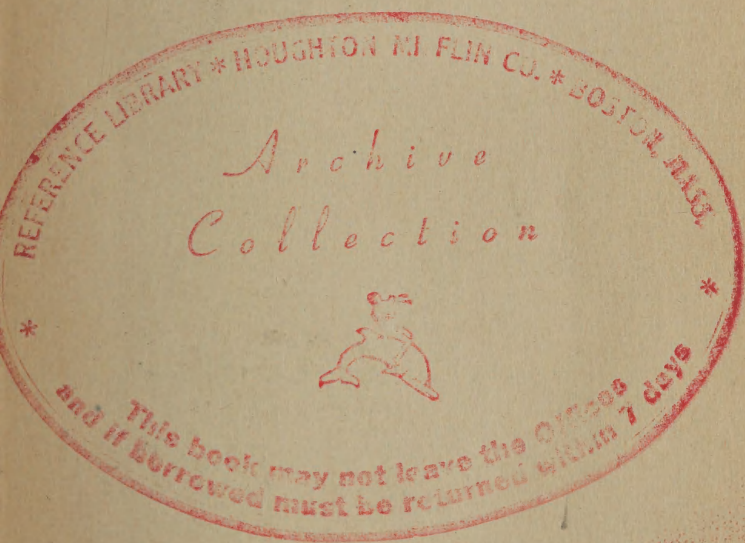


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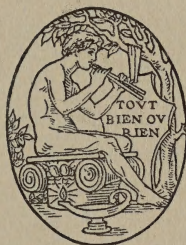
QUEST

A Novel

BY

KATHARINE NEWLIN BURT

Author of 'The Branding Iron,' 'Snow-Blind,' 'Q.,' etc.



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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QUEST

BY

KATHARINE NEWLIN BURT

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TO
MARION A. G. GALEY

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BOOK I

THY FAITH AND FEAR

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BOOK I

THY FAITH AND FEAR

CHAPTER I

THE STAINED-GLASS WINDOW

ON a certain morning in June, the first Sunday of the month, in the year 1892, a tall gentleman in pepper-and-salt trousers and a tail coat walked up the aisle of Saint Matthew's Church, the leading Protestant Episcopal establishment of the Hudson River town of Kaaterskill, with his son's fingers in one hand and his high silk hat in the other. His nephew, a boy of nine, walked close beside the silk hat. The expression of Mr. Joseph Gregory's face, with its side-whiskers, its long nose, and its brown near-sighted eyes, was that of a long-eared hunting-dog, nervous, mournful, and conscientious. As he moved faithfully and humbly up the aisle, the mosaics of which had been donated by his father, he seemed bent upon retrieving God. He urged his little boy Johnnie into the pew, entered it himself with bent head, and, turning an admonishing look sideways across his nose to assure himself that Nicholas followed closely, got down on his knees for the preliminary silent prayer.

Nicholas, who had been spending Saturday night with his cousin at the Gregory Homestead, looked across his uncle's gray-waistcoated and concave stomach with its dangling chain and tried to catch Johnnie's eye. But Johnnie had

closed his eyes and was praying audibly, 'Let two words roar lips
antations roar hearts balways eptbul sigh Told Lor strength-
and deemer . . .' Nicholas muttered 'deemer' and rose
simultaneously with his uncle and his young cousin. He
glanced back to see if his own family were yet in church, but
the other Gregory pew was empty. In fact, Uncle Joseph
was, as usual, very early. There were only two dark-clad
poor women in church. One was the sister of his nurse Mary
Greene, and could be smiled at; the other was as familiar as
the chancel, being every Sunday, rain or shine, stuck up in
that particular corner like a clay image, but she was socially
non-existent, nameless. Nicholas would have smiled at her,
too, but her face was knitted up to piety. Therefore he
turned his eyes, large, green, and curiously translucent, to
the colored window under which he sat. Johnnie would be
looking at it he knew. Johnnie always spelt out that
Anglican inscription as soon as ever the preliminary prayer
was over. Nicholas would always remember his cousin's
meek little blunt uplifted profile round which his short soft
hair fitted like a moleskin cap, with its sweet-cornered lips
moving to the words — 'Sacred to the memory of Sarah
Hands Gregory, beloved wife of Joseph Israel Gregory. She
departed this life June first 1888 in Thy Faith and Fear.'

Sarah Hands Gregory had been Johnnie's mother. Nicholas and he both thought that the white-haired angel of the window was a portrait of her, and wondered half-fearfully what it would have been like to have her, with those ecstatic pale hands, wide eyes, and shining locks, at breakfast or about the nursery. In the window she was walking through a field of flowers, the orderly blue flowers of heaven. The inscription interested the little boys. As they sat there, waiting for the service to begin, they remembered each his own associated experience. Nicholas, with his detached curiosity, wondered what could be the meaning of 'Thy Fear.' But Johnnie was infinitely more puzzled by that other quality of 'Thy Faith.' Faith was a cross, and Hope an anchor, and Charity a heart. Angela had them in silver at

the ends of dark-blue ribbon to mark her new red prayer-book. But there was no symbol for Fear. When he wanted to understand the Fear of God, Johnnie closed his eyes and saw . . . Hooker . . .

CHAPTER II

LITTLE JOHN'S MEMORY

ONLY a week before this Sunday, Hooker had come to Joseph Gregory's house with Great-Aunt Abbey. The occasion was the christening of Johnnie's baby cousin, Ruth. Johnnie had looked forward to Aunt Abbey's visit with an intensity which had given him indigestion and caused him to be extraordinarily pale. He had never seen Aunt Abbey, but, several years before, she had given him for Christmas a beautiful soft white-fur cat which he had named Tabby, believing it to be a compliment to the donor. This Tabby had been his pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night; she had shared his meals and his punishments, his nightmares and his sleep. Lately she had been taken from him by his father because that prohibition officer had considered a toy cat taken to meals and bed an unmanly refuge from reality. Johnnie had cried in corners silently, as was his way, and through awful hours of darkness he had suffered until a fat corner of his down-stuffed quilt had partially substituted itself for Tabby and had received the aching kisses and the tears. Now, in the strange half-practical, half-credulous imagination of a timid six-year-old, Aunt Abbey took somewhat the place of the quilt corner. He had always spoken of her as 'Awn-Tabby,' and he had fancied her large, soft, and white, very comfortable, very comforting . . . a human being, of course, but a human being with a queer difference. He could hardly wait to throw himself against her beautiful white chest and bury there the gnawing remembrance of his loss. As God had made man in His own image, so, surely, had 'Awn-Tabby' made Little Tabby in Her image. It was hard to wait. First on that Sunday, seven days back, had come the morning service from which they were to return to greet Aunt Abbey. There

would follow immediately Sunday-School Lesson presided over by the benignant visitor. There would be dinner, there would be an hour of family conversation, during which Johnnie pictured himself snuggled into 'Awn-Tabby's' velvety embrace. . . . Perhaps Awn-Tabby would take a beautiful warm nap with her silver hands folded under her chest. Then would come, after a drive to Uncle Martin's house on Maple Lane filled with other visiting relations, the christening of Baby Ruth, an interesting, if unattractive, Redness with a great toothless mouth and a great inhuman voice.

There had been no flaw in Johnnie's anticipation of the day until, just as they were stepping into the church porch, his father muttered to him nervously, 'I hope you know your Sunday-School Lesson extra well, Johnnie. Aunt Abbey will be there to listen to it. I don't want her to be disappointed in you.'

Up to that instant it had not occurred to Johnnie that he might not know his Sunday-School Lesson. It had been prepared with the usual conscientious thoroughness, but, during the droning and mystical ceremonies of Morning Prayer, while he muttered the mournful 'we seech thee tears galore' of the Litany and the more inspiriting 'Whirl Thou tend, Amen,' of the Gloria, Johnnie had increasingly convinced himself of failure. He did not know his Sunday-School Lesson. There would be no time to look it over. He would fail. In the glorious silvery presence of Tabby's Awn-Tabby he would fail. . . . As they were getting into the carriage Mr. Gregory and Cousin Sally Hands, a visitor from Wataconic, New Jersey, missed Johnnie.

'He ran away across the graveyard while you were talking to Mr. Hunt, Cousin Joe,' said Sally. 'He'll probably run all the way home.'

'He'll have to, if he expects to be in time for the Sunday-School Lesson,' remarked his father anxiously, and, sitting down in the carriage, a rockaway driven obviously by a gardener-coachman and pulled by a team which it was im-

possible not to suspect of homelier week-day labors, he pinched up the carefully creased trousers at his knees.

Johnnie did not run all the way home. He plodded slowly through the dust. He would miss Sunday-School Lesson, but Papa would not make a scene because of beautiful Awn-Tabby's presence and the impending christening. Failure, therefore, would be avoided without penalty.

He arrived, dusty, hot, anxious, suddenly and sharply anxious, and came into the presence of his elders only a few minutes before dinner was announced.

A great wide black figure, with a long face, lemon-colored hair, and small fat feet, sat in the biggest tapestry-covered parlor chair. Cousin Sally was talking to it, so was Papa, and so, it seemed, was Nicholas. Nicholas, spending the Sunday as usual with his cousin, had come, to judge by his pink-and-white serenity, bravely through the Sunday-School Lesson. Behind the piano in a flat-chested, crouching posture, suggestive of refinement and of self-effacement, sat a third woman utterly unknown and unaccounted for to Little John.

'Why, here,' said the great black figure without smiling — 'why, here is Little John, our Sunday-School truant.'

Papa turned around, all in one piece with his hands behind him. He bent forward a little from the waist towards Johnnie.

'We will meet our Aunt Abbey later, John,' he said. 'First . . . it seems to me . . . perhaps . . . we had better go into the book room for a few minutes . . . just you . . . and I.'

From the book room to the unavoidably listening ears of Nicholas, red and white, of Cousin Sally, deeply flushed, of Aunt Abbey, bland, faintly smiling, stroking her own smooth hand or her silken knee, came the dreadful sounds of punishment: old-fashioned emphatic unmitigated punishment . . . a sound as of cracking ice, an unbelievable regular crescendo of howling. A door closed, beautiful silence intervened, and Joseph Gregory reappeared, rigidly smiling, his eyes haunted and perplexed, rubbing his hands, one of which was reddened by the edges of a ruler.

'I am sorry, ladies, to have caused such a disturbance, but . . . it seems to me . . . perhaps . . . that if these faults are not promptly corrected they rapidly develop into habit . . . I believe . . . at least, so it seems to me . . . that a merciless inevitability of punishment is . . . is . . .'

Aunt Abbey sighed, drawing in her breath. 'We are sorry for *you*, dear Joseph.' Her voice was sweet and calming. 'It was . . . trying. It was . . . unfortunate. Did the poor child show that he was sorry?'

'Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He did.'

Indeed, if howls of anguish bear any relation to an attitude of mind, there could have been little doubt that Johnnie was in a state of sorrow.

'John is ordinarily a docile and obedient little fellow,' said Joseph anxiously.

'Where is he now?' asked Cousin Sally in a stifled voice.

Joseph turned towards her and saw that her eyes were of a glinting intensified blue, her cheeks unnaturally scarlet. Her hair, he thought, lay in a deeper yellow pile upon her brow.

'I have locked him into the south parlor,' Joseph stammered, avoiding that intensified eye. 'I thought . . . it seemed to me . . . better that he should not be allowed to have dinner with us to-day.'

'I think,' said Cousin Sally, 'that corporal punishment may do very little harm to children.' She choked. 'But what it *must* do to the grown-up man or woman that . . . that inflicts it . . . just makes me tremble!'

'What do you mean, dear Sally?' inquired Aunt Abbey gently.

'To take a tiny thing of six years old, and drag him out and hold him down and . . . and get him ready, all shaking and scared and begging for mercy, and . . . and strike him so that he screams with pain and fright, and keep on striking him *hard*, with a ruler . . . *Devils* would look the other way,' said Sally, and her voice lifted an octave and cracked.

'Miss Sally has such a tender heart,' said Miss Anna

Farralee from where she crouched behind the piano, twisting together her damp hands. But Miss Abbey being silent, she flushed and fingered her lower lip.

Joseph, too, was silent. He looked pale and hurt . . . conscience-stricken . . . as though he had failed to retrieve God.

In the silence, Nicholas, with that face of exquisite moral purity achieved by one child during the punishment of another, crept doubtfully across the carpet and thrust his round yellow head from behind under Miss Sally's arm. She caressed it, and when, in another minute, dinner was pronounced ready, they went in welded together, Nicholas's head still thus protected from the spiritual and voiceless storm raging above it.

The south parlor was a large cool empty room. It was used only for ceremonial purposes, a dance, a house-wedding, the funeral of Sarah Hands Gregory, 'beloved wife.' It was closely shuttered, and its few large pieces of furniture were covered in gray-and-white striped linen dusters. Even its chandeliers were swathed to keep fly-specks from the gilt. The bare mahogany floor stretched away like black ice from Johnnie's stubby boots, still covered with the dust of truancy. During the first few minutes of his imprisonment in this cold vault dedicated to remorse, he stayed very close to the huge door of his enforced entrance, entirely absorbed in physical distress. The burning pangs of chastisement were gradually subdued from their unbearable first intensity to a glowing soreness that brought tears at a movement or a touch. His father had wielded the ruler with the cruelty of a timid and undecided man who has worked himself up to the point of execution. It was a beating to remember. And with it went the sense of disillusionment and of loss. 'Awn-Tabby' had gone the way of other beautiful ideals, of Santa Claus, of fairy godmothers, of the friendly Sandman. She was not soft and silvery and comforting. The great black figure, sitting so straight, had called him 'Little John, our Sunday-School truant,' thus giving his father an unmistak-

able lead — more, no dignified alternative but punishment.

There was a second preoccupation which kept Little John pressed up close to the big door even after his body gave his mind release. In a pause in torment, his father had questioned him.

‘Do you know, my son, Whose anger you have incurred besides my own just indignation?’

Little John, cringing in horrid expectation of another blow, had twisted the tail of his anguished eye towards his father's dreadful face with its wrenched smile of determined inquisition, and had wailed out hopefully, ‘Awn-Tabby's, Papa?’ to be prepared instantly by a tightening of the lean leg which nipped both his own for a renewal of execution.

‘Human indignation is negligible, John,’ the executioner had awfully admonished, his ruler aloft, ‘compared to the anger of a neglected God. In running away from your Sunday-School Lesson you ran away from the service of your Eternal Father. Be sure that God is angry with you.’

Whereupon the ruler, smiting down, did indeed seem to consume him, as with fire from heaven.

Now, a consciousness of irremediable estrangement from all love and all mercy chilled Little John's heart.

God the Father was angry.

God the Father had turned away His awful big featureless white-bearded face, and had hidden it in feathered folds.

God the Father would punish him dreadfully, lingeringly, by a perpetual coldness, a perpetual sense of exile.

Little John Gregory would not be loved.

And for Little John, then and always, there was no possible happiness except in loving and in being loved.

He knew that he must repent instantly, audibly and convincingly, but so confused were his small thoughts, and so disorganized by fear and pain and shock his entire nervous system, that he could not think what repentance meant nor how a sinner went about it. A vague picture of bodily prostration, of groveling, of lament, of cringing promises of betterment, some vow of sacrifice; oh, yes, that was the way

of it. He would give up something dear and beautiful, one of the rare perfect possessions of an imperfect, generally prohibitive world, and God the Father would be pleased . . .

Little John moved doubtfully forward a few steps down the darkened room. After the heat of his June day wandering and the flush and scorch of struggle and of punishment, the air of this enclosed space struck very chill. And then, three feet from the door, he stopped and his heart began to pound, for he knew, just then, that there was a presence in the room.

It would, I am sure, be impossible to exaggerate the agony of Little John. It was a tightening grip upon his small vitals which slowly squeezed life, all the homely familiar realities of living, away from him. For, from the most dark and distant corner of the enormous room, there came a faint crisp rustling as of feathers . . . and immediately thereafter a voice . . . a voice without human modulation, cold, high, faintly chuckling, superior to finite doubt and weakness.

'I am the Lord thy God,' it said and stopped.

Little John stood. He waited, but he did not know either that he stood or that he waited. He did not even know that he was afraid. He had become Fear . . . the Fear of God.

'Thou shalt have none other Gods but Me.'

Little John's fingers curled up stiffly and the nails pricked his palms. His tears lay cold on his face and the sweat of his body chilled.

'I am a jealous God.'

There followed silence, then again something with feathers stirred.

Little John lifted up his voice and shrieked aloud. He held himself perfectly rigid from neck to heel, threw back his head and shrieked with all the life-force that was in him.

At sixty years, Miss Abbey Gregory presented to the world an appearance at once dignified and comic. Her own profound sense of worth, based primarily upon the consciousness of a not very difficult maintenance of chastity, gave to

her eye and well-lifted face, to her flat regular steps and upward surging posture, a real imposingness. This undeniable dignity of hers, however, had been betrayed to comedy by her besetting sin.

At the time of Ruth's christening, fashion had decreed a hat of very large flat brim and low crown, known, unless I am chronologically mistaken, as a 'Merry Widow.' But Miss Abbey, having at eighteen been found irresistible by at least one member of the courting sex in a tiny flowered bonnet tilted forward until it rested almost on the delicate tip of her long Episcopalian nose, had had the strength of mind to remember and to resurrect this never-forgotten personal success. Her mild eye, composed and sweet in its self-satisfaction, its Christ-tempered severity, peered closely from under this minute shelter with an effect incredibly absurd. Below the hat, a pale large face, a mouth ratlike as to the upper teeth and inclined to remain open at times when it might better have been closed, an ample flat and flowing figure, clad in feminine jacket, mannish waistcoat, and full gathered skirt, a pair of tiny thin-soled buttoned kid boots made up an *ensemble* which definitely delivered Miss Abbey over to burlesque. Besides this betrayal of her person, vanity, in the terrifying fashion of all unconscious frailty, exposed itself in innumerable little tricks of posture and expression: in vain pattings and pinchings of the pale soft faintly speckled hands, in complacent strokings of plump silken knees, in sudden and soft indrawings of her breath, a sighing hiss resolutely changed at the last second into a chirp. These breaths were expressive of vague disillusionment, of hurt vanity, of a sensitive rejection of realities, too painful and impure, a Christian resolution to be, in spite of everything, a cheerful saint. It was possible, almost, to love Miss Abbey, and it was difficult to dislike her. It was easy to respect her, but it was absolutely impossible not to laugh at her. And if she had known this truly, it might have been her death. Her vanity and her dignity were the bread and wine of her cold and sentimental spirit. She was stuffed with

feelings, but she had none of that deeper quality which is known as 'heart,' and without 'heart' one may suffer almost to the death of such a wound.

When Miss Abbey, on the occasion of Ruth's christening, decided to remove this impressive serio-comic personality of hers, with all its necessary accompaniments and adumbrations, from Philadelphia to the Hudson River town near which her nephews lived, she decided that she would take her large brown three-trayed trunk, her gray valise, Anna Farralee, and her new silk umbrella. There arose, next, the question of Hooker.

Thirty times since breakfast of the day before departure, Miss Abbey had gone over her plans with Anna Farralee.

'I'll take the brown trunk, Annie, you may have the third tray entirely to yourself . . . take the pretty little gray frock I gave you, dear, it is so becoming, so soft and ladylike . . . and then, I think, perhaps, the gray valise had better come with us. We can tuck in a sandwich and a bottle of beef-juice for the journey. I always feel a little faint after the station in New York . . . so close and so confusing, and, though dear Joseph says you come down the wooden steps, I never remember doing it. I remember going up, of course . . . but . . . And I'd better have my silk umbrella because the violets in my bonnet ran when I went to Susan's funeral. But, I *don't* know what to do with Hooker.' And Miss Abbey would go over to Hooker's cage and look at him with a peculiar expression in her eyes. It was an expression of sentiment, of complacency, of faint regret, and strong distaste. Hooker, seeing her, would invert himself and begin to climb all over the cage, upside down, downside up, cocking his ash-gray head and his glowing yellow eyes and cleverly grasping bars with all his deliberate amber toes. His tail, the color of a flame amongst the ashen feathers of his wings, balanced him nicely in whatever attitude.

'Thou shalt have none other gods but me,' said Hooker, chuckling and presenting his head to Miss Abbey to be scratched. Miss Abbey drew in her breath.

'He was given to me by a dear, dear friend,' she said, chirping.

'That handsome Mr. Thorpe, wasn't it, Miss Abbey?'

'Yes . . . a delightful gentleman and such a modulated voice.'

Mr. Thorpe was a widower, a clergyman, and the father of six children. When Miss Abbey had refused, fifteen years before, the offer of his hand in marriage, he, being unable to present her with the six unmanageable children, had at least rid himself of one encumbrance — he had given her his parrot. The bird, presented to Thorpe by an important parishioner, recently dead, had been the delight of the young inmates of the rectory. They had resented Miss Abbey's tentative motherliness and they resented even more her acquisition of Hooker. Hooker had infinitely relieved the monotonies of that dim study where their father's voice, pure, Christianly patient, almost ululate, had, Sabbath day by Sabbath day, repeated to them the doctrines and instructions of the Church Catechism until Hooker on his perch had become expert in Mosaic Law and had joined spasmodically in the recital. But Miss Abbey, touched, delighted in her vanity, had welcomed Hooker and had . . . detested him. She believed in her profound love of animals. She never passed a cat without hissing softly, 'Poor pussy, pretty puss,' the meanest cur that breathes drew from her cries that were too deep for tears, and the expressman cursed her almost audibly for a meddling old fool because she would ask him in sweetest accents whether perhaps his load was not just a trifle too much for that 'darling team.' But no animal lived at 1699 Spruce Street until Hooker came and towards Hooker Miss Abbey's attitude was hypocritical, complicated, and difficult in the extreme. She did not, in departing for her Hudson River visit, wish to leave Hooker with unsympathetic servants because of the bird's sentimental value, she certainly did not want to be bothered by him, although dear Annie would take charge of him, of course . . . But deep down in Aunt Abbey's consciousness a plot was developing. Per-

haps one of the little boys . . . Joseph's or Martin's . . . would take a great fancy to Hooker. Perhaps, being so sweet to children, dear Aunt Abbey would not have the heart to take Hooker away from the affectionate great-nephews. Perhaps Hooker, sentimentally intruding into her life, might thus be sentimentally and appropriately subtracted from it. This plot came slowly into consciousness. At the last minute, when the cab of departure stood before the door, Miss Abbey sent Anna Farralee upstairs to fetch down Hooker.

'Just throw that piece of embroidered silk over his cage, dear Annie. It wouldn't do to have him talking on the train. Sometimes he chooses such . . . unfortunate . . . commandments. People might not understand that he had been a clergyman's parrot.'

Miss Anna, flushed with secret anger, doubled her thin body and loped with her curious meek agility up the steep stairs. She came down holding the cage at arm's length. As she got into the cab, more than half filled by Miss Abbey, the scarf slipped and, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery,' Hooker remarked excitedly.

Cousin Sally had been the first to reach Little John. She got through the parlor and the hall and the book room without so much as letting fall her table napkin. In unlocking his prison door, she rid herself of that encumbrance and in an instant she was on her knees beside the rigid clammy little figure, still at its horrid shrieking.

'Little John! Darling Little John! What is it? Oh, what is it? Tell your Cousin Sally, dear.'

'It's God! It's God!' gasped Little John, pointing and using all that was left of his voice and breath.

Cousin Sally was the only human being that heard this curious ejaculation and for some reason, intricately psychological, she chose to ignore and to forget it. Being shocked and faintly frightened, she must, it would seem, have dismissed it entirely from her mind and memory. At least, she never spoke of it, not even to Little John himself. It was one

of her many failures . . . poor kind blundering little Sally, emotional and yellow-haired.

Now, instead of asking him for explanations, she poured forth reassurances. 'It's Aunt Abbey's parrot, honey. Did n't you know he was in here? He came with Aunt Abbey while you were at church and we put him in that dark corner so that he'd be quiet. Poor lamb! The bird frightened him out of his little wits, Cousin Joe. He didn't know it was in the house and it screeched out of that dark corner.'

'Dear! Dear! How unfortunate!' said Aunt Abbey peevishly. 'Come over, Johnnie, and see my pretty Hooker. He's so beautiful and clever. I know you will love him ever and ever so much.'

'Of course he will,' said Joseph. 'John loves all animals. Stop your crying, John. Be a man. See, Nicholas isn't afraid. Nicholas likes Hooker. Come over here this instant and see the beautiful parrot. Come here this instant, sir!'

Little John came with dragging steps, with a white and twitching face, and let his father put one of his little ice-cold hands close to the terrible golden beak and the round and fiery amber eyes.

'Awn-Tabby,' an idol unconscious of detected clay, spoke sweetly. 'If you are a very good boy, Johnnie, I may . . . yes, if you are very good and very sorry for running away from Sunday School, I may give you Hooker for *your very own*.'

'Crickey!' said Nicholas, scarlet with envy and excitement.

Joseph drew Little John close to him, half in affection, half in admonishment, and under his grasp the soreness of punishment obtruded itself. The little boy gave one shaken hiccoughy sob.

'Thank you, Awn-Tabby, I'll be good,' he said, his eyes widened on the creeping, clinging talons of the promised reward. And, at this naïve evidence of immediate gratitude and of submission, his elders laughed in loud Olympian chorus so that the big cool room echoed like the inside of an iron bell.

CHAPTER III

NICHOLAS'S MEMORY

BUT to come back to Saint Matthew's Church on this Sunday of June, 1892. Nicholas, looking up at the stained-glass window sacred to the memory of Sarah Hands Gregory, was only vaguely interested either in Thy Faith or Thy Fear, because of a strong associated preoccupation. Through an experience as searching in its way as Little John's, he had chanced upon a strange discovery. It antedated Little John's recent introduction to the Fear of God by several years. Nicholas on this Sunday morning was already past his ninth year and had been released from the kilts which still disgraced the slender legs of Little John. On that afternoon of past event, however, which because of the onrushing beauty of the angel figure was associated in his mind with the radiant memorial window, Nicholas had been kilted in blue-green Scotch plaid and his knees had been bare, and he had worn, over a green velveteen jacket and a wide starched collar, a splendid mop of yellow curls. So had he been dressed when Mary Greene, his nurse, had discovered him drawing pictures with indelible ink on one of these same wide collars. It was dusk, a village nursery-twilight such as, with its soft chiming of bedtime birds, the sound from below of homing footsteps, the rustle of sunset-colored trees, haunts an adult memory with a strange, persistent aching sense of homelessness. At such an hour, Nicholas, made ready for an evening meal with his sister Angela and an evening game of romps with his Papa, was usually posted at his western window amongst the vines, pressed close against a guard made necessary by the lowness of the nursery window-sill, his chin on the top iron bar, chanting to himself long tuneless sagas concerning birds and hills, a golden street lamp and a golden star . . . so good and sweet a 'lamb child'

that Mary was always satisfied to leave him alone and see to the nursery supper and Angela's more formal nine-year-old curls.

On this occasion, however, Nicholas had not got himself as far as the window, and, being for some reason in the artistic rather than the poetic vein, had been attracted by the tiny bottle and its sharp small pen left by Mary after marking nursery linen on top of his chest of drawers.

He had just achieved a creditable likeness of his Grandfather Gregory, since dead, wearing a pair of spectacles, a square beard, and a skull cap, when Mary from behind had pounced upon him. The pounce had upset the bottle of indelible ink, thus ruining two more collars besides the one Nicholas was decorating and staining a square inch of gray nursery carpet.

Mary Greene loved Nicholas, as all women from the beginning did love him for his beauty, his detachment, and his cold sweet smiling, and she was pious and patient besides, though Nicholas's ways might have forced down the proverbial Patience from her pedestal, but the ink catastrophe, in which she saw with dismay (for she was afraid of her mistress, as indeed most people were) that she was very heavily involved, upset her nursely equilibrium.

'Nicholas,' she had cried aloud and with appalling emphasis, 'see what you done!'

'I didn't done most of it,' replied Nicholas, scarlet but calm, with a high clear articulation which nothing discomposed; 'you done two collars and the rug . . . and they aren't dec'rated either like mine is.'

'You are a bad boy. And your Papa has just this minute come in.'

That did seem a peculiarly malign and apt conjunction of events.

'And waitin' to see you in the downstairs hall with presents in his pocket for you and Angela, no doubt. No present will you get this night but a sound spanking, or ought to, which I will do my best to see that you do get. Off

you go with me straight down to Papa, takin' that naughty collar with you. . . . Drawin' a sassy picture of a dear old gentleman like your Grandpa who is always so kind to you and gave you a penny only last Saturday. . . . Yes, and you praying God last night to be made a good obejient boy.'

'If you'd 'a' lef' me alone,' Nicholas had pursued with the same soprano composure, 'nothin' much 'ud of happened. You came and spoiled everything.' And here his enormous green eyes did fill with passionate tears. 'You're as bothering, and . . . and as prying . . . and as interfering as . . . God.'

Mary Greene cried aloud and fearfully. She bent above Nicholas as though to shield him from a bodily ill and clapped over his mouth her needle-pricked, soap-puckered hand. 'Save us . . . save us . . .' she muttered, and achieved by the heartfelt prayer an influence denied to her usual conventional disapprobations, for Nicholas, turning his eyes away from her face, allowed himself to be lifted to his feet and propelled, the hand still over his mouth, pressing his head back against her corset, in front of Mary down the bare third-story hall and the bare third-story stairs and then along the carpeted second-story passage and down the carpeted second-story stairs, step by step, landing by landing, turn by turn, in a dread portentous silence, until, at the last turn and the lowest landing of all, they had stopped and achieved a dramatic position six shallow oak steps above the rest of Nicholas's family grouped under a hanging kerosene lamp in the middle of the hall below.

Martin Gregory had just come in from the summer twilight. His must have been one pair of those eager homing feet half-heard by Nicholas engaged in impious portraiture. This Martin was a very different man from his brother Joseph, a younger, stockier, beefier man with less of the Gregory and more of the Bittering characteristics of his mother's family. He had a shrewd and solid look, eyes steady and hard and a very wide and ready grin, more expansive than revealing, except of a splendid supply of square white

even teeth. He was at that time nominally a lawyer in his aged and tyrannical father's New York office and commuted daily by a two-hour train journey to the city, but his real interest was absorbed by a rubber factory he was planning to build on the pretty village creek and for which he was already collecting interest and support. Besides, he experimented in real estate, turning over his investments with a great deal of astuteness and good fortune. To Joseph and to the elder Gregory, this Martin was a firebrand of finance, a gambler, a perpetual menace to the family equilibrium. In mutual consultation, the two leaner and more anxious men sighed or grunted out their uneasiness. 'What will the boy do next?' 'He'll be a burden, he and his family, on us, Joe, mark my words, before many years are out'; and always, from one or the other, 'And that Caroline Simpson wife of his just drives him on.'

'That Caroline Simpson wife' at the moment of Nicholas's immolation on the lowest landing had stood up on her tip-toes to embrace her husband and was hanging back her tawny head in order to present her mouth to his. She was a pretty creature enough in a human fashion, that is, with very noticeable limitations: her skin was exquisitely white but liberally freckled, her hair was gorgeously yellow but straight and of unequal lengths, her pink mouth was too small, her teeth, white and even as Martin's, were too large, her neat nose had a tendency to redness, and her eyes looked large or small, pretty or insignificant, according to her mood or physical condition. Now, they were beautiful and brilliant as the eyes of a Christmas doll.

Beneath her mother's elbows, Angela was clinging to her father's legs, jumping up and down so that her long black curls leaped like animated cork-screws, and saying over and over, sure that she must eventually be heard, 'What's that in your pocket, Papa?'

In spite of her somewhat materialistic preoccupation, she was the first to see the descent of Mary and the tableau on the landing. She tugged and pointed. 'Nicholas's been bad,

Papa,' she announced. 'Nicholas must have been awfully bad or something.'

Both of Nicholas's parents turned and looked up.

The culprit, his mouth still blocked, appeared red-faced and rumpled, his curls in a riot against the background of Mary's calico-clad and austere person.

'You wouldn't believe it, ma'am,' Mary whispered in such a fashion that her whisper seemed to fill a listening world, 'what that child has said.' His lingual sin had wiped out from her faintly guilty and therefore unwilling memory all knowledge of his manual one. 'He said to me, says he, and them is just his words, ma'am, and just his sassy manner, as you know I don't exaggerate, but am overly conscientious in all things . . . "Mary," says he, "you're as bothering and spying and interfering as . . ." Mary's whisper faltered, her voice grew big and hollow, "as . . . *Gawd*."

Outraged sisterhood became immediately petrified in the person of Angela. 'O Papa . . . Papa . . . !'

Caroline flushed and her mouth twitched with mirth; Martin winked his right eye — the one away from Mary — at his wife.

'Let him go, Mary. Come down here, Nicholas,' he said in the round voice which to Nicholas always sounded as rough and ruddy as his father looked. 'That won't do, Mary. He'll have to take that back.'

'I should say he did, Papa,' purred Angela, 'talkin' about God that way!'

'And I think, Mr. Gregory, reelly, as how he had ought to be spanked, sorry as I am to say it, for impiety won't go much further than that and there will be a judgment on him.'

'O Papa,' Angela instantly demanded, 'are you going to spank Nicholas?'

Nicholas had started down the steps, but Angela's undue interest in his fate pricked his defiance like a burr. He paused.

'Well, He is so,' Nicholas declaimed. 'He is so . . . He numbers hairs 'cause Mr. Hunt said so in church, and He

knows the secrets of every man's heart. So He must be spyin' and interferin', Angela, and *you know it.*'

'Don't laugh, Martin,' Caroline admonished hastily. 'You'll have to punish him.'

'Oh, well, damn it . . . leave me alone, you three harpies. I'll punish him if I have to.' But Martin looked towards the small being on the step with frank regret, for he liked Nicholas and he was tired and dirty and wanted to get into his tub and have a good splash and wash and rub before his dinner. Besides, he knew Nicholas of old and was afraid of him. The high light of martyrdom was in the boy's eye, curls and kilts had become a sort of flame and sackcloth. It was with a hopeless look and in a voice of desperation that he addressed his son.

Mary, pinch-lipped, Caroline humming to distract her mind, and Angela obviously gratified by the drama, watched the departure of Nicholas upstairs in Martin's custody. The interview took place in the bathroom, the only bathroom, and was inaudible below. But it lasted so long that Caroline, increasingly restless and unhappy, though she knew Martin's punishments to be far less severe than her own, at last went up.

She was met by Nicholas himself. He had wept, but the tears merely moistened, as it were, the surface of his mood, which was marble hard and firm. His mother, watching the little figure come swinging towards her, its kilts rhythmic as a Highlander's, its chin set, felt at her heart a pinch of fear. Sometimes the conventional situation of parenthood, the accepted give-and-take of authority and of submission, of tenderness and of reliance, had a way of being shaken before her mind's eyes as though by a tremor of subterranean earthquake. She was a devoted mother; Nicholas was a darling pretty boy. She knew every fondled inch of him, body and soul, and it was her holy duty to shape and form and nourish that soul and body. But Nicholas, marching towards her, cold and firm, had an indescribable look of fate upon him, as though he knew his destiny to lie in stronger

forces than her own, as though he were springing up of himself from the earth, armed, like a soldier of the dragon's teeth.

Caroline was an executive woman and there was much of the tyrant in her temper. She felt something in her stiffen against Nicholas and the sensation stimulated and alarmed her.

'Nicholas darling,' she said, but the 'darling' had a steely intonation, 'are you sorry for saying that dreadful thing about God? Will you ask Him to forgive you?'

Mother and son had now met together in the upper passageway. Nicholas's green eyes shone up at her through the dimness like a cat's.

'I'll ask Him to forgive me for being rude,' said he, high-piping, 'but it was the truth.'

He walked past her and went to his room, where Caroline heard him tell Mary in the same treble key that he was to go, by Papa's command, supperless to bed.

Caroline, a perpendicular wrinkle between her eyes which had lost their beauty and their brilliance, sought for Martin. He was discovered sitting on the wooden edge of the bathtub. It was an old-fashioned bathroom, with much varnished woodwork and every article of use carefully covered, enclosed, and disguised. He was in his shirt-sleeves and was red and breathless. He looked up from under a disordered bang of reddish hair, helplessly into the grim face of his wife.

'Don't ask me to thrash Nicholas again,' he said. 'I've promised him a licking to-morrow if he doesn't give in, but I'm damned if I'll keep my word.'

'Martin! Martin! You didn't bring him to his senses at all. He got the best of you.'

'Bring him to his senses?' Martin tossed up his thick arms in their white sleeves. 'I tell you, Carrie, he eats pain. I'd be ashamed to strike him again. He's too darned little. Besides, it doesn't do any good. You could burn him at the stake. It's some psychological trick. He sets up his spirit against punishment. *I* can't break him. But' — he laughed

ruefully — 'but he's broken me, Carrie. I'll never hit him again.'

He bent his head to his broad hands.

A spigot dripped against the tin bottom of the tub. Voices came up faintly from the village street.

'He hasn't broken me,' said Caroline, her syllables falling separate and sharp like the drops, 'and he never will. If you don't whip him to-morrow, I will.'

Martin stood up and laid one of his heavy hands on each of his wife's narrow shoulders. 'I'm no psychologist,' he said; 'I'm a business man, and I'm a pretty hard-headed one at that. But don't you try to break Nicholas . . . nor whip him either. I tell you, before you're through with it, you'll break your own heart.'

He turned his face away and looked past her out through the small high window.

'Angela isn't like that,' said Caroline, wishing that Martin would change this aspect so unlike his usual straightforward, rather bullying manner; 'she's such a perfectly sensible, satisfactory little creature.'

Martin looked down at her and grinned. 'Angela is . . . you and me, Carrie. But Nicholas . . . he's the devil for all I know. Come on, chick, I've got to wash up for dinner.'

Mary, weeping copiously, had put her charge to bed. He ignored her grief, for, though intermittently shaken by his own sobbing, he had higher preoccupations. Once in bed amongst carefully arranged pillows, however, he condescended to console his betrayer.

'Don't cry, Mary. You were mean and silly, but I guess you love me.'

'Oh, Nicholas darling, you'll tell your Papa first thing to-morrow you'll be good. I couldn't bear for you to be whipped no more. . . . Oh, my poor pretty!'

'Why, Mary Greene . . . (move your head a little, Mary, so's I can see the star) . . . you know you went and got me spanked your own self.'

'Twas an awful thing you said, darlin'. How can you pray to God to-night, if you ain't sorry?'

'I'm not going to pray to-night. I don't think God will expect' it . . . Good-night, Mary. You can go now. I'm not a bit hungry cos I go'ged on bread and jelly this afternoon . . . I feel pretty tired.'

He sighed deeply.

Mary went out, sighing more deeply. The thought of his punishment to-morrow weighed on her heart — enmeshed by Nicholas, entirely compassed about and absorbed by Nicholas — like an iron ring.

But he, after a long brooding contemplation of the star, a contemplation in which no thought of fathers, human or divine, or of corporal punishment or spiritual damnation, mingled, tucked his right hand under his cheek, blinked his big eyes, and slept.

And, like other prisoners for conscience' sake, he dreamed a dream.

It seemed to Nicholas that he was hastening across an immense lead-colored plain under a sky sad and evenly clouded. Here and there from the gray desert soil a big rock flat as a blackboard thrust itself up. As he came to these rocks, Nicholas, with a piece of yellow chalk, wrote upon them sentences and words. They were of an extraordinary interest and beauty, these inscriptions, and though the instant he had written them they became incomprehensible to him, he knew that, set up in this open place, they would be read and understood by others and that he, Nicholas, would be enormously acclaimed. No one before had ever imagined sentences of such strange beauty and truth. Mamma, Papa, Angela, and Mary Greene would see them, and the little boys and girls at school and the milkman who teased him about his kilts and curls.

As he wrote, however, and ran forward quickly to write again, he knew that all the while he was being followed and pursued. There was a great vague thing back there beyond the horizon sweeping on his trail, coming silent and steady

on his tracks. He had, therefore, to be both fast and fearful. The shadow of his pursuer began to stretch across the plain.

At last, Nicholas, having inscribed with flaming truth the boldest rock of all, turned and saw that his mighty follower was very near. It was an enormous winged presence, whether of darkness or of light he could not tell, and it swept across the world like a shining cloud. There was no more time nor strength for his writing. Nicholas flung away his bit of yellow chalk and strangling with fear looked about for an escape. In all the visible earth there was no hiding-place. Can a child hide from a shadow? Can a writer of sentences flee from a light? Terror swelled his throat. He beat his hands against the advancing power, beat and writhed, and, suddenly giving way to swooping submission, felt himself sink into a softness, a warmth, a consolation greater than Caroline's when she had time to hold him to her breast, a rapture of relief and of release, of surprise, of unearthly joy.

And the beautiful enfolding thing that had followed him and found him, conquering his fear and his reluctance, now spoke and said, 'I am thy God.' At which, laughing aloud for amazement and relief, Nicholas awoke.

A big moon stood up opposite him in the open nursery window. It was a clean white sphere and had the look of being fastened there against the sky like a flat silver toy. The short window curtains sucked in and out before it with a very faint sound as they brushed the wooden sill. The house was entirely quiet and all the other houses of the village imitated it. No more homing footsteps, no more voices: every one, man, woman, and child, in houses like boxes, lay stretched out on a line with the earth and like the earth were perfectly dumb and still. The trees, though, were standing up, awake, with their heads against the stars and the wind walked all around the world, freer than a boy on holiday.

Nicholas found tears on his face. He remembered his punishment. At the same instant he knew that he was light and happy and that the problem had been solved. But how?

And why? Why did he now understand that he had been wrong about God? That the other people had been wrong? That all the world had been wrong . . . always? It would be very easy to apologize to Papa. Poor Mamma, too, would look happy, and the ugly expression would leave her mouth and eyes and that horrid straight little ladder she set up on her forehead. He wouldn't wait until morning, for the discovery was an extraordinary one, and perhaps Mamma and Papa, expecting to be obliged to whip him to-morrow, lay crying on their pillows, wide awake. He got up out of his bed and moved boldly across the nursery floor.

Martin and his wife slept in a broad bed side by side. Their room was in the front part of the house on the story below Nicholas. Its shuttered windows had been bowed, but the moonlight slanted through in misty bars. The little tawny-haired active woman was softened into unconsciousness, the big young man, with his resolute thick lips parted boyishly, lay with his hand outside the covers across her body. Their heads were sunk deep into the large square pillows and the light blanket outlined their shapes in profile, the woman's hips rounding higher than the man's, his great shoulders pulling up and away the covers from her throat. The door was open so that any crying of a sick or frightened child might wake the sleepers, those two people both at heart fearful children who had assumed the responsibilities of this household with its servants and its little helpless creatures, the usual encumbrances of mature humanity. The man, snoring evenly and softly, knew that he must daily provide means for the support of this intricate machinery of living and his dreams were haunted by the possibility of failure, by the thought of old age and incompetence, by the unspeakable dread of illness: this little woman must shape, contrive, painfully contort herself to all the needs, the claims, and the desires of the five people who looked constantly to her for an answer to every possible emergency of soul and body. The courage of the two was an astounding thing to contemplate,

their ability to sleep, trustful and still, a sort of nightly miracle.

Into the open doorway, its openness a symbol of this subconscious and perpetual fear, a small white figure, its feet enclosed in bags of canton flannel, ran and paused. It peered about, identified the big bureau, the tall shaving-stand, the chest of drawers, Mamma's sewing-table, the broad white bed. It ran, soft as a moth, and flung itself against the blanket, shaking Caroline awake. Her eyes came open, and Martin bounced up on his elbow and stared, his heart pounding visibly against his muslin nightshirt.

Moonlight revealed Nicholas, rosy, star-eyed.

'Mamma, wake up,' he piped, as loud and shrill as noon-day. 'I want to tell you something. It isn't true about God. He is not prying or meddling or interfering. He doesn't care about collars and ink and things. Mary is wrong. He comes after you like He's hunting. He don't care what you do. I'm sorry I said that, Papa, because it wasn't true. Now I know better. You won't have to whip me to-morrow, so don't worry about *that*. I want to kiss you and then you go right off to sleep again.'

Caroline and Martin stared, were kissed, and left to a moony bewilderment. Nicholas had effectually wakened them.

'That boy is cracked,' Martin exploded, after certain cogitations. 'I tell you what, Carrie, he's been too much with women. Why should he be thinking about God? It's not healthy nor normal. Too much mother, too much nurse, too much sister. I'm going to cut off his curls, put him into knickers, and send him to the public school.'

Caroline was frightened, not at Martin's decision with which she secretly agreed, but at Nicholas himself. Long after her husband, relieved by the energetic promptness of his remedial plan, had gone to sleep and resumed his soft and rhythmic snoring, she lay staring at the brightened shutter slats and worrying about Nicholas. She did so want him to be successful, rich, distinguished. It would be dread-

ful if he grew up . . . queer. Her mind eventually slid off to rest itself on Angela. Angela was so nice. Mrs. Grover had said, 'What an exquisite child!' She curtsied beautifully at dancing school. If only Martin had more money they could give her piano lessons. She was certainly musical and drew very well. Angela was really talented. Of course when old Mr. Gregory died, Martin would be better off. Certainly he was a good business man and, once freed from that musty futile lawyering, he would have a chance to make his pile. The rubber factory . . . there might be a fortune in that! How she would work to help him. Sarah Gregory, Joe's wife, had been a conceited woman and had thought her, Caroline Simpson, vulgar. She supposed she oughtn't to think about Sarah that way now that Sarah was dead, but she *had* been a cold, conceited woman . . . no humanity in her. Very distinguished of course, and a lovely voice, but she had no go to her. She'd never push Joseph. Poor Sarah! She had thought Caroline Simpson vulgar and had deprecated Martin's marriage, but now she was dead . . . distinguished-looking women were apt to be delicate and to die easily. Poor little motherless Johnnie! He was a much better baby than Nicholas had been, but not nearly so strong and handsome. If only Nicholas would grow up like other people . . . and so on until she slept.

CHAPTER IV

THE LITTLE FOXES

THESE reminiscences, long in the telling, were very brief in their passage through the memories of the two little boys: being in fact nothing more than a flash of associated emotion, fresh and painful to Little John, vaguely elating to his cousin. Long before the end of the first canticle which Little John, on his Sunday morning of June, 1892, hummed through devoutly, 'O come lessing under the Law,' Nicholas's family, from whom he had been separated by a Saturday night's visit to his Uncle Joe, and who now therefore appeared to him almost in the guise of strangers, had filed into the pew just behind him, and the attention of both boys was therefore entirely diverted from the stained-glass window.

Nicholas ventured a backward glance and smile at his Mamma, whose lips wrinkled carefully for a response which managed to combine love, admiration, a desire to straighten his tie, and an admonitory 'Hush.' Nicholas thought Caroline looked very pretty, and his father, very red. Angela, now in her twelfth year, was, as usual, reproachfully perfect. Three black curls fell down on each narrow shoulder to the high sash of her starched frock, her little mouth was thin and pink, her eyes were like wet black jewels. They glittered at Nicholas in two glances, one for his cow-lick, one for his tie, and dropped piously down to the red prayer-book in her hands. Angela was the only feminine creature who remained forever impervious to Nicholas's enchantment, and all his life long when he looked at her there would come into those detached and shining eyes of his a vague bewilderment.

The Reverend Mr. Hunt presently rose in the pulpit and opened the soft leather covers of his written sermon. Julius

Hunt was a little gray man, younger than Joseph Gregory, but aged by the complexities of his belief, which necessitated an eternal adjustment between what his observation told him to be real and what his creed told him to be true. Besides being the Rector of Saint Matthew's, he was the husband of a brown-eyed woman in the front pew and the father of little Hesther Anne who was looking across the aisle at the Gregorys and wishing that Little John and Nicholas were her brothers and that she could have a sash like Angela's and a hat trimmed all around with daisies . . . then, remembering God, Whom she believed to be present somewhere between the altar and the litany desk, with His Son on one side and His mysterious relative the Holy Ghost upon the other, she dropped her eyes and prayed to be forgiven for her wicked worldliness. Hesther Anne had a composition book on the sill of her little attic window under the rectory eaves. Its pages were filled with conscientious régimes for conduct, with resolutions, with anxious lists of faults to be overcome, with small ejaculatory outbursts of love and gratitude to God and Jesus Christ, to Papa and to Mamma. There was a prayer asking mercy for poor Tom Devinney, who, one day on a street corner in Hesther's hearing, had taken the name of God in vain.

Mr. Hunt's sermon was listened to very solemnly by all the Gregorys. His text was, 'Consider the lilies of the field,' and he admonished his congregation at considerable length to give up being anxious over the things of this world, and told them that, if they would have faith, God the Father would care for all their material needs. Then he came down from the pulpit, changed the tone of his voice, and asked his congregation to contribute to the material needs of Saint Matthew's in the matter of lawn-mowing and a new altar-cloth. And presently 'the plate' was passed when Little John, sighing, sacrificed by parental prompting a new quarter of a dollar, while Nicholas dropped in three dirty copper cents. They made a braver sound than the quarter, but he was ashamed of them. However, they were all that

was left of his allowance, and 'The Lord,' he thought, 'will take care of the lawn anyway if Mr. Hunt has faith.'

On the church porch, after some exceedingly noisy and emphatic chatter with her neighbors, Caroline invited Joseph and Little John to Sunday dinner. . . . The children, separating gradually from their acquaintances, walked home, gabbling and skipping and teasing one another; their elders climbed into Joe's rockaway.

Upon the death of the elder Gregory a year or two before, Joseph had fallen heir to the Homestead and to a small fixed income and Martin to a correspondingly larger portion of the more negotiable properties of the estate. He was actually, therefore, as far as ready money was concerned, a richer man than his brother, but he lived more simply, had never moved from the plain little clapboard house on a side street of the town, still kept only Mary Greene and a cook, sent Nicholas and Angela to public school, and walked to and from the now realized beginnings of his rubber factory and, on Sundays, up the dusty road to church. Caroline, in consequence, was glad to climb into the back seat of the rockaway beside her brother-in-law.

The sober workmanlike team shook their heads and started with a certain eagerness for home; the dust flew up from the narrow metal-rimmed wheels; the smell of the church grounds, turfy and warm, merged into the smell of the leafy dusty village street, of dinners preparing to right and left in the pleasant small houses. The road went steeply down to the creek, very bright and pretty to-day between its willows and its meadows, then up again, moving always away from the soft rounded hills and descending at last towards the great expanse of the Hudson River, white with sun. Before they got down into the main part of the town, they could see over its roofs the little broad ferryboat plying across to the opposite larger town, leaving two bright folds of water behind it like trailing wings and having altogether the air of an active water insect.

'I should think,' said Joseph, 'that is . . . it seems to me . . .

Fall's donation ought to be enough for the upkeep of the church grounds. Hunt is not a business man, not much of a manager, that is . . . it seems to me . . . There are other parochial needs . . . the matter of poor Mrs. Toskit, now, and her ten children. Very faithful communicant . . . Mrs. Toskit.'

'Damn careless of her to have ten children,' growled Martin from the front seat, and George Garvery, the coachman gardener, beside him grunted softly in agreement. 'She chose a drunkard for husband. Why should people be spared the penalties of their own follies, eh, Joe?' But he flushed a little as he said it, for he was conscious of a particular folly for which he had not yet paid the full penalty and never, he fancied, would be obliged to pay it.

'There would be very little mercy then for any of us, Martin,' quoth Caroline; 'and perhaps it isn't made easy for some of these poor working-men to keep straight.'

Martin was touched on a sore spot, for the death of Toskit had occurred in the factory mill-stream, into which Toskit, returning drunk from one of the saloons which had sprung up along the narrow new street of the industrial plant, had toppled headlong. He had been leaning top-heavily against a broken railing of this bridge, also Martin's property. There was no law to compel Martin to care for Toskit's bereaved family; the man had been drunk; it was his own fault; nevertheless, those ten children made a troublesome preoccupation. Now he grew as red as his new brick buildings, turned half around, and began to shout at Caroline and to pound the back of the seat with a thick fist.

'There's a kind of a fool that will kill himself sooner or later, and the quicker he does so, the better. It's not liquor that makes the drunkard, nor easy access to it, nor running water that drowns him. It's the drunkard that makes the drink profitable and it's the top-heavy fool that falls into the water. I'm damn sick of all this mercy talk. What's it amount to? The fit dragged down by the burden of the unfit,

the unfit allowed and encouraged to reproduce their kind. It's madness; there's only ruin for the future of a race that indulges in such imbecile "mercy." If sinners got their come-uppance, it'd be a general warning . . . healthy . . . that's what it would be. If Toskit's ten children died of starvation, which they won't be allowed to do, women like Mrs. Toskit would not be so damn quick to marry Toskits nor to bear children to them. That's the truth . . . take it or leave it.'

'But the saloons, Martin,' piped Caroline, as treble and as persistent as Nicholas, 'coming into Kaaterskill . . . They just line the road to the factory now. You expect Nicholas to work there. Think of the temptation to young men . . . at that age . . .'

Joseph, who hated the rubber factory and who had refused to invest a penny in it, looked across Caroline out of the carriage window with an air of aristocratic detachment. Caroline, even while she piped, admired his pose and his expression and wished that Martin had been more Gregory and less Bittering in his looks. She was not conscious that Martin's thick and ruddy strength was the fundamental cause of her devotion to him.

As a matter of fact, Joseph's thoughts were not as aristocratic as his pose. He was figuring up the expenses of the morning, twenty-five cents for Little John's donation, half a dollar for his own . . . charity . . . seventy-five cents — Joseph who lived with a certain pretension was intensely frugal. He had a series of leather volumes marked 'Family Journal and Expense Book,' which, with its quaint and honest charm, became the delight of his descendants . . .

. . . 'Brother Martin, wife, and two children to Thanksgiving Dinner. Turkey, ten pounds (at eleven cents a pound, \$1.10).' Or, 'Baby born to Martin's wife Caroline this morning. Girl. Eight pounds. Gift of rattle, 20 cts. The infant will be named Ruth Simpson Gregory after Caroline's paternal grandmother . . . Have ordered an extra quart of milk. Doctor's orders for my son John Hands

Moore Gregory. Doctor's visit, \$1.00. Milk, six cents a quart. Exorbitant.'

On their way from Saint Matthew's Church to the village, the rockaway, its horses momentarily rebellious, passed the stone entrance posts of the Gregory Homestead, and, at sight of their square dignity, Martin's eloquence subsided. Those posts always gave him a pang. He preferred, as a matter of fact, his own inheritance which he had invested in the rubber enterprise, but he had greatly loved the Homestead and its associations were living in him. It was, he now thought, no longer his home, nor would it be Nicholas's. John would inherit it and John's children. It would move farther and farther from his blood. Well . . . (and here unconsciously he adopted somewhat the fashion of his Caroline Simpson wife's soliloquy) he'd have a place of his own one of these days, something really handsome: formal gardens and a lot of lawns, a lake with swans and a marble pavilion, and, indoors, bathrooms and a parquet floor for his parlors and, perhaps, black-and-white marble paving in his front hall and a big dark staircase. The Caroline Simpson residence, to be sure, fell all to pieces in his fancy when he got out of Joe's carriage at his own front porch. The house looked shabby and second-rate, a mere working-man's cottage, 'villagey,' 'common.' He wished Caroline wouldn't air the blankets where they could be seen from the street. Mary Greene might sometimes spread Ruth's diapers elsewhere than on the back fence. But, as he came in, his mood brightened. His nostrils told him that there was to be mutton and caper sauce for dinner. Sally was a good cook. Already, he ate better than Joe, and drank better, and his children were prince's children compared to Little John.

At thought of Little John, however, Martin's pride softened into a sweeter emotion. Little John seemed to be looking up into his face . . . a darling, that's what he was. Joe would never make a man of him, no matter how often nor how conscientiously he thrashed him with that enormous ruler . . . and Martin could not understand how any grown

man could strike so serious and gentle a small being . . . but, man or no man, there was something about Little John . . . and Martin's rough materialistic heart, the heart of Esau, grew soft all about its edges as it never did when he thought of star-eyed Nicholas, the incomprehensible.

There was really mutton with caper sauce for dinner and some fine old port, and, to the children's rapture, ice-cream and strawberries. Caroline, Joe, and Martin talked above the unceasing chatter of the children and the frequent comments and admonishments of Mary Greene, functioning both as nurse and waitress, rather like people calling to each other from bank to bank of a quick stream. At his own more stately table, Little John observed a timid silence, but here, in the hearty and explosive, Simpsonized atmosphere of Uncle Martin's house, he gradually became articulate and his little face flushed, and he went off into gales of laughter so that he choked and had to be patted on the back by Mary Greene.

Fortunately for the children's enjoyment, it was not until the last spoonfuls of melted cream were being disposed of that Nicholas threw a high explosive into the languor of the Sabbath-Day gossip of his elders.

'There's a boy at school in my form named Tom,' he said in his clear pipe, 'and I had a big fight with him. That's how I sprained my thumb. He licked me. He was teasin' Angela and she made me fight him. So I had to. He's the son of that dressmaker, Miss Devinney, in Gissing's, the place you won't go to, Mamma. Tom has to walk three miles to school.'

Little John lifted his innocent small face. 'I thought motherses were always missuses, Aunt Caroline,' he said.

Caroline's body had stiffened and her nose was pink. Martin's bold brown eyes crept away from the faces about his table and a sullen mask seemed to be tied across his face.

Nicholas went on. 'Tom looks quite a lot like me, but he's older and bigger and sort of stouter. I tell you what he does look like, the pitcher of my Great-Uncle Roger Bittering

when he was a young man in his Civil War uniform in the album. Tom's always teasing Angela.'

'He kissed me,' said Angela primly, with an air of complete disassociation of spirit from flesh.

Martin's face became blotched and his eyeballs bloodshot. Caroline's forehead mounted its ugly ladder between her brows. She had suddenly a Medusa look.

'That's what comes of sending your children to a horrid vulgar public school,' she screamed, 'where they meet nameless riff-raff of the county, little brats from the street, the scourings of a town like Gissing's, dressmaker's bas —'

'Hush!' Martin shouted, half out of his chair.

And Caroline, springing from hers, clapped her napkin to her mouth, threw back her head, and ran out of the room, rattling through the long beaded strings of the portières. Mary Greene exclaimed, 'Tchk! Tchk!' — and the children's eyes fled away in uncomprehending fear from Martin's face. Nicholas, moreover, was white, and his eyes had filled with startled tears. Joseph looked faintly disgusted as though his nostrils had been offended. There had been a time, indeed, when Martin, friend of all the county and a ready drinker, had offended the nostrils of that Gregory feature to a point where they were almost ready to detect a perfume in his marriage with the Caroline Simpson woman.

Because of the dénouement to that Sunday dinner, Nicholas the following autumn was sent to boarding-school and Angela acquired an English governess. Also, Tom Devinney, by Gregory influence, no doubt, was dismissed from the Kaaterskill school. Whatever plans Martin and Caroline may have entertained for the education of their younger daughter Ruth were circumvented by an arch-educator. She died of cholera infantum only a month later. Little John, who had been very glad of his little cousin's smallness and of her fingers clutched about his own, mourned for her. She, with her new ecstatic smile of welcome, went the way of Tabby, soft and the object of his especial tenderness.

Little John was not sent to boarding-school. Joseph, who had at first agreed that the boys had better not be separated, flinched when he learned the cost of tuition at the expensive New England institution. He had Little John into the book room and held him between his knees and talked to him gloomily and reproachfully.

'You are now old enough to understand, my son, that I am far from being a wealthy man; that, in fact, I am a very poor man, a very poor man, indeed. I cannot afford an extravagance of this sort for you. I mean . . . you must make up your mind to be industrious and economical. I hope, by scraping and saving and going without things which . . . that is . . . I might otherwise have enjoyed, to send you to a university. I expect you to appreciate my sacrifice. In the meantime I rely upon you to assist me by every means in your power, by implicit and cheerful obedience and unexampled industry, in my plan for you and not to allow your childish disappointment' — for Little John had been crying bitterly — 'to cause me grief.'

'I'll try not to, Papa, but, oh, I want so much to go with Nicholas.' And Little John, not conscious of wounding his father's feelings, wept afresh.

There was a flush on Joseph's face. He was jealous of Nicholas, of the hold that small gay person had upon the affections of his own only boy, so that Little John actually cried at not being sent away from his father to school. He tightened his legs warningly on either side of the child's body and made Little John's heart stand still. He choked down his grief and kissed his father. He felt somber with guilt, for he should have been grateful and he should have loved Papa much better, oh, much better. Poor sad Papa, always so anxious and fearful, who gave such big sighs and let one of his mouth corners droop down in a fashion obscurely and conspicuously horrible.

'Go and play now and forget all about this, John. You are young and young grief is short. Ah, youth . . . youth . . . youth . . .' And Joseph let his head fall and dropped his

hands, palms upward, along his knees, which had at last released their little prisoner. He did not know that he was posing as a heart-broken man and a care-worn father, but . . . as soon as Little John, properly impressed and depressed, yet vaguely and guiltily aware of the dramatic quality of Joseph's exhibition, had crept out of the room, it is to be noted that the elder Gregory changed his position and began to figure briskly. He felt that, in deciding not to send Little John to boarding-school, he had laid by a cool thousand of dollars and that was . . . well . . . (in a whisper!) . . . happiness, as nearly as the hag-ridden mind of a Joseph could envisage it. Something laid by against a rainy day, a barrier between himself and his son and all the terror of a money-regulated universe.

CHAPTER V

THE GLORY OF CHILDREN ARE THEIR FATHERS

LITTLE JOHN'S fear of God at this period, the autumn when his Cousin Nicholas went to school, began gradually to translate itself into a fear of life. He was certainly the most fearful of little mortals. It would be wearisome to recount the things that frightened him: the shady part of the Homestead drive, for instance, where the big larch trees came close and where there was a ditch under the road, the silt basin on the edge of the field, trees in a wind, black clouds and thunder, any very large animals and all insects, strangers, the sound of unseen horses' hooves, the sound of scythes busy in a meadow, birds flapping close, the freckled shadow of outside leaves on the matted floor of his father's bedroom, his father in bed or partly clothed or in any sort of disarray whatever, the study with its deep-silled windows, its books, its thrilling ruler, and, most of all, always . . . Hooker.

For, whatever other fears came and went through his small darkened mind, there remained with him always that childish terror. The necessary hypocrisy insisted upon by an adult world that expects from every Christian child a natural love of creditable beasts, only increased his secret apprehension. Twice a day he went, palely, dutifully to the cage and fed its inmate, putting fresh water in one of his dishes and bird food in the other, and regularly, drearily, distastefully he cleaned out Hooker's cage. He even learned to pretend a sort of cheerfulness. He would chirp at Hooker.

Only once, the outstanding rebellion of his life, he made a desperate attempt to rid himself of the gray and flame-colored incubus. Hooker's cage stood near an open window and Johnnie deliberately forgot, that morning, just before he left for lessons, to fasten the cage door. He left it well ajar. Not until late that afternoon did he dare to look into the room. Hooker was gone.

Unbelievably bright did the Homestead suddenly appear to Little John, all its shadows lightened. Hooker, no doubt, was winging his way through the flaming western dusk, following the sun, taking his fiery eyes and his cold immaculate voice to lush companionable lands where he would carry to heathen folk that message of a 'jealous God.' Out in the matted jungle, the dark and happy savages would tremble . . . 'I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have none other Gods but me . . . ' Johnnie skipped about the halls, distracted, flushed, and sang, shrill and tuneless, on his way to bed.

Just at dawn he woke. There was no real light in his small room, and yet there was no real darkness either. He could see vaguely the ghosts, the astral bodies of chair and table, wardrobe and washstand, the ghosts of his clothing, the tall ghost of the pole on which were hung his cap and coat and flannel wrapper and his waterproof. Even his two little stubby boots were queerly visible, like gnomes cuddled together in the middle of the floor. The world was strange and filled with strangeness. It was no time to be awake. There was some almost visible reason why little boys should sleep, unseeing, at such hours as this. In the pale square of his unshuttered window something squatted, scratched. It brushed his sill, flapped down and fluttered across the gray and colorless space . . . Johnnie, shrunk into his pillow, wan and staring, saw a familiar . . . it mounted, deftly climbing, inverted, beak and toes in use, to the top bar of his bed and there it cocked its head and, chuckling, spoke.

'I am the Lord thy God,' it said.

Little John's cry brought his father running in his gaunt nightshirt, a candle in his hand. That was the end of rebellion. Little John accepted, was resigned. He gathered Hooker patiently into his life and harbored him there with all the other shadows and alarms . . . the very embodiment and voice of fear. As well, thought John . . . in that region of the mind, however, just below real thought . . . as well try to struggle against him, resist him, as to rid one's self of God.

He was there and He would be there always, brooding over a child's life, sleepless and inescapable.

In the society of other children, Little John was happier, especially in the society of Nicholas who had a sword-like gayety and courage. It was not only losing his kilts and curls and being sent to school that distracted Nicholas from his preoccupation concerning God. There is always in earliest childhood a deep instinctive interest in the fundamental problems of humanity: in sex, in life and death, and in religion. It is as though the human larva began its career in a sensitized condition and then, at eight or nine years, developed a protective shell. By the time Nicholas was nine years old his shell was as hard and brilliant as a beetle's and Sex, Death, and God had to all appearances dropped out of or deeply into his consciousness which was almost completely absorbed by the occupation in hand, by resistance to authority, by anger against interference, and by ecstasies of rapid movement, of competition, and of enterprise. He developed besides at this time a gift for ironical and fluent comment irritating to his elders. To his contemporaries, however, he seemed extraordinary, especially to that young cousin, Little John.

Unfortunately, when Nicholas went away to boarding-school, Joseph decided that if the public schools were not fit for his brother's children they were even less fit for his own son, so that he kept Little John at home and undertook his education. Twice a week only he went to the law-office in New York where the business he did hardly justified the expense of the railway journey, but was a necessary adjunct to the Gregory dignity. The other four mornings he devoted to Little John. Joseph was a terribly earnest and conscientious teacher. He sat at his desk with Johnnie beside him and he looked more than ever like one of those long-eared serious hunting-dogs. Everything must be learned, *verbatim et literatim*, i's dotted and t's crossed. The lessons began each day with a great show of diligent cheerfulness, but Joseph, for all his earnestness, was a poor teacher. Progress

was infinitely slow and, since the fear of punishment was the only incentive violent enough to carry Little John's mind triumphantly over the numbing obstacle of his fear of Joseph, punishment came to be a more and more frequent necessity. What a purgatorio to both of them that dim brown room became before the end of the long winter . . . the snowy day outside, a glaze of sunshine or a tree-streaked monotony of bluish white, pine-branches and the branches of the sad larch trees, all loaded and draped, scraping the deep-silled windows, a coal fire in the grate, books and papers scattered across the table-desk, Joseph hesitating and faltering, postponing as long as possible the inevitable ruler, looking at his little bewildered student with a real anguish in his eyes.

In this weary fashion Little John got through his arithmetic, his geography, his spelling, and his primer Latin, and got them, it is true, with an almost terrible thoroughness. Every syllable his father taught him clung to his memory like a burr, so that when he was a middle-aged man he could recite whole pages from those tear-splashed volumes. There is that, and that only, to be said for the old-fashioned agonies of his instruction.

In the afternoon when he had finished his painstaking preparation of the lessons for to-morrow, Little John was free . . . with a limited freedom. He was not allowed to play with the gardener's sons nor with any of the village children, his erstwhile public school acquaintances. But he could go down to his Uncle Martin's and visit Angela, who was acutely bored with him and shut herself into her room or ran away to some girl friend's house as soon as she saw the small patient figure come plodding through the front gate, which he never forgot to latch carefully behind him. He could visit the two prim little Blodgett girls, the big ferocious William Paxton, the eight young Rogerses who lived so far away that the horses had to be harnessed for an expedition there . . . and he was allowed to play with Hesther Anne. With Hesther, Little John was happy, almost as

happy as, and far more peaceful than, when he was with Nicholas.

Hesther Anne's little Book of Resolutions had received few entries that year. Her conscience and her moral energy had been abruptly diverted from introspection into objective activities. The brown-eyed mother, who had carried so many of the parish burdens, who had nursed the sick and helped the poor — only so very little poorer than herself — and visited the neglected aged folk, those most pitiful of orphan children, and had gone in and out in all weathers on her slender young feet and had instructed classes in the Articles of a Faith to which her mind was submissive while her spirit soared above its limitations to the mighty pragmatisms of its unconscious Founder, who had never missed a service, nor failed to answer little Hesther's questions nor to kiss her hurts nor to 'hear' her prayers, who had been to the Reverend Julius Hunt the most eager listener, the merriest friend, a mistress of secret beauty and delight . . . this extraordinary girl-wife and mother had died of a congestion of the lungs within a few days of the Gregorys' Ruth. Hesther at eight years old had stepped quickly forward like a tiny recruit into the empty place.

What his wife had been to Julius not one of his parishioners might know. He had loved her as only a sensitive man, whose emotional side outbalances his reason and his education, can love a woman. After her death he was never at all happy nor entirely sane. His passion for her had been the safe outlet for a hundred secret ferments, his love for her had been the sublimation of a thousand restless instincts. The poor soul, hag-ridden by his beliefs, now entered into one of those ghastly wrestlings between the spirit and the flesh which so exhausted and devitalized the mediæval saints. At night his little daughter could hear him groan and pray aloud.

Hesther had the comfort of a faith entirely appropriate to her years. She believed that her angel mother, happy and well, came and tucked her in at night and kissed her. De-

prived of that belief in a personal, joyous, and physical immortality, little Hesther would have been sad indeed . . . a lost and frightened lamb. She was very busy and much too tired after her day for small repentances and prolonged self-examinations, but she had some time to herself and she loved to play with Little John.

The two children would sit for hours in the shallow March sunshine on the top of the rectory stone wall and talk and talk in their earnest little voices. Their games were nearly always talk-games. The rectory chickens would peck and cluck behind them in the rectory yard and the neighbor's goat would nibble the brown grass at their feet. Hesther would have her doll or her kitten or her slate. She was a great hand for drawing pictures. Like most girl-children she was the entertainer and John, the entertained. Her human experience, moreover, was vastly greater than his own, her life infinitely more varied, vital, and significant. But nobody listened like Hesther when it was her companion's wish to talk. She had a way then of holding back all her soft hair from her ears and forehead, of leaning forward and opening wide her speckled gray-brown eyes around which a dense even line of black lashes made an emphatic, indescribably attractive border, and her lips would fall apart and move just a trifle, sensitively, in sympathy. While she listened to you, Hesther was your captive, a dear soft captive with a golden heart and an intelligence like quick, clear, and shallow water.

'Why don't you bring your lessons down here so's we can do them together, Johnnie? I can help you with the spelling and you can help me with my sums.'

'Papa wouldn't allow me. He wants me to de-velop consinstration. I have to sit in the study with my back to the window.'

Hesther sighed. She liked Mr. Joseph Gregory, who always smiled at her and stroked her hair and wished he had a little girl of his own, and who gave her every Christmas a nice present, but she did not think he understood Little John nor made him happy.

'Well,' she said hopefully, 'we won't have lessons much longer now before the holidays. Won't it be goody, goody, goody to have Nicholas home?'

Little John's face first brightened, then shadowed.

'He's bringing home a friend, Hesther.'

'O-oh, is he? Well, won't that be nice, don't you guess?'

'I dunno.' Little John, huddled on the wall, his legs gathered under his chin, blinked his brown eyes anxiously. His stockings had fallen about his shoe-tops and his bare scratched legs looked cold. In fact, all winter long, Little John looked cold. He was not allowed to wear heavy underwear and he was made to take a cold bath every morning. Poor Joseph, always in terror of the child's delicacy, was trying to harden him. But Little John never reacted to the bath and was afflicted with goose-flesh at intervals all day thereafter. He said nothing about this discomfort which seemed to him an inevitable part of winter's general misery.

'It's a cousin of mine, Stephen Hands. Do you remember Cousin Sally Hands?'

'Oh, don't I? She was just sweet.'

'Yes.' Little John thought for a moment of Cousin Sally and remembered how warm her arms had been about him. 'Nicholas says Stephen is a cousin of hers too. She's coming to visit Uncle Martin during the vacation. And so's Stephen. Wait, I'll show you. Uncle Martin acherly gave me Nicholas's letter for my own.' Little John got it from his pocket with his numbed little chapped hands.

'This is all the part about Stephen. . . . It will int'rust you. "Stephen is a queer dick and the boys poke fun at him and he is sort of freakish, but if I want him for a friend I guess I can have him. He's Little John's cousin and Sally Hands' cousin too. His father exploded himself in a kemikal labratory and he hasn't any mother either. Stephen keeps lice in a pill box in his shirt and lets them feed in blood from his arm. . . ."'

'O . . . o-oh,' moaned Hesther, and, letting her hair fall over her face, she rocked to and fro on the wall. Little John

was pink with pride in the glorious masterful courage of his cousin's style and with disgust and horror at the contents of the pill-box and their cannibalistic habits.

'What will Angela do?' he thought, and two queer lonely twinkles opened in the soft and honest seriousness of his moleskin-colored eyes.

The rectory chickens behind the children scattered with squawkings and Mr. Hunt came through the grounds with a tall lean gentleman who stooped from his shoulders and carried his hands behind him. At the same instant, Mrs. Baxter, wife of Kaaterskill's leading real-estate man, now temporarily absent, trotted down the garden path on the other side of the wall on which the children sat. It must have been a prearranged meeting, for Mrs. Baxter threw open her gate and became explosively cordial.

'Do come right up to the house, Mr. Hunt. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Fane, indeed. Anything to oblige you, I'm sure. I'm ashamed of my garden, but the frost's not out of the ground yet and all those stalks do look so dreary, and that goat . . . I declare I'd have him shot if it weren't that Sam's so crazy over him. He'd eat anything. Yet I kind of got a soft spot for him myself. A mighty smart animal . . . a goat. Did you ever notice how like a man he looks about him?'

While Mrs. Baxter exploded and Mr. Hunt bravely endured her explosion, the lean slack-bodied man stood apart and apparently, after his first bow and smile, concerned himself with Little John and Hesther at whom he looked with a keen and tender interest.

'What sort of little bird is this, Julius?' he asked. His voice had melody and kindness.

'Dear!' ejaculated Mrs. Baxter. 'I didn't see the kiddies. Won't you catch your death, John Gregory, with those bare legs?' Little John was undeservedly unpopular for being 'stuck-up and pampered.' His father would not allow him to play with Sam Baxter and his goat. To the children of Kaaterskill Sam and his goat were like twin brothers, one exactly as human and socially important as the other.

Little John began meekly and timidly to pull up his stockings. He gave his whole attention to the matter, but Hesther looked with all her eyes at Mr. Fane.

'I'm Papa's daughter,' she said. 'Hesther Anne . . . going on nine.'

'I have a little girl,' said Mr. Fane, coming closer, 'but she's not like you.' He rested his hand on Hesther's head, moved it back gently and looked into her eyes. 'Lola is a very wild little girl and a very glad one.'

'I'm glad too,' said Hesther.

'And you are . . . Papa's son, I suppose?' asked Mr. Fane, releasing Hesther and turning to her companion on the wall.

'No, sir,' answered Little John, quivering with shyness. 'I'm John Hands Moore Gregory.'

'All of it?'

'He is all of it,' Hesther explained with patience. 'That's the way he was named. They gave it all to him, I guess, because he was the only child there was to give it to.'

'I see.' Fane contemplated Little John with eyes of trained and uncanny intuition. He could almost presently have described the dim brown study and its Dravidian rites. In fact, later, without any more exact knowledge he did describe them accurately . . .

'And you think you can show us a nice place for Mr. Fane, Mrs. Baxter?' Julius Hunt was inquiring with the paternal air of a pastor, curiously absurd in this small youngish gray man to the big ruddy noisy woman at whom he had to look up, but who did her best, in the loyal way of women, to equalize his disadvantage by a cringing attitude and an humble expression. 'We shall want a very nice little place indeed. We want him to stay here with us. He's a writer, Mrs. Baxter, a writer of books . . . a very famous writer.'

Little John, forgetting his stockings, stared softly.

'I declare,' said Mrs. Baxter, not particularly impressed.

'But don't make any mistake about it, Mrs. Baxter. Your rector wouldn't advise you to read my books.'

Hunt colored and stammered and Mrs. Baxter looked prim and slightly crossed her eyes, lest one should see the visions of the other. Mrs. Baxter had read a good many books without her rector's permission . . . naughty books: 'Trilby,' for instance, and another about a young man who went to France and had a mistress . . . a terrible book . . . with a bedroom scene by no means conventionally marital.

She said, gliding away from danger, 'I do think I have just the little place in mind that would suit a student, Mr. Hunt,' and stood aside for the two men to walk through her gate.

The goat sprang away the full length of his tether and put down his horns above the 'manlike' stare of his gray eyes.

'Perhaps he's eat some of Mr. Fane's books,' quoth Little John, twinkling again and returning to his task of pulling up the stockings.

And from that instant Mr. Fane was forgotten by Little John, for the writer of books did not like the little place offered to him by Mrs. Baxter and did not renew his Kaaterskill investigation for the matter of a dozen years.

CHAPTER VI

A SEEKER AFTER TRUTH

ON the evening of the first day of his Easter vacation, Stephen Hands, announced by Nicholas and bearing no doubt somewhere on his person the dreadful pill-box, stepped with an eager clumsiness into the house of Martin Gregory, tilted up his large nose and through enormous concave spectacles looked searchingly about him.

'What's your house made of?' he inquired in a loud harsh voice. 'I see it's wood on the outside, but is there a brick foundation and bricks under the boards or is it just lath and plaster?'

Nicholas, at his heels, flushed with the raptures of home-coming and the enthusiasm of his family's welcome, did not know.

'You live in a house and you don't know what it's made of,' said Stephen less in scorn than in sorrow.

At the supper table he discovered that Cousin Martin . . . he adopted the family in all its branches, though he was not related directly to any of them except Sally and Little John . . . could not correctly analyze for him the elements of table salt.

'You eat it all the time,' said Stephen, 'and yet you don't know what it is.'

Caroline, superintending bedtime ceremonies, did not know why children lost their first teeth nor what was the difference between the first set and the second; nor did she know the essential properties of Pitcher's Castoria for which children had just begun to cry.

'I should think that as a mother you wouldn't want to give it to your children lessen you knew just what it was, Cousin Caroline. If *I* was a mother, *I* wouldn't, I know *that*.'

The next morning Mary Greene didn't know why Ivory

Soap floated nor how the window sashes worked, the cook understood neither yeast nor mushrooms. 'And you'd better keep out of my kitchen, you little goggle-eyed toad,' said the cook, 'or you'll get your face smacked.' The cook was not withheld from an expression of natural feeling by a sense of hospitality or of kinship.

It is quite dreadful to contemplate the unpopularity of Stephen Hands, the violent and vituperative dislike he inspired in this pleasant American household. If you have ever seen a big dog roused from tranquillity by a sudden small alien activity in the middle of his back, seen his body convulsed, his legs at wild odds with composure, while his head twists about and he vehemently attacks, with a snarling noise and with a lifted lip, the invisible intruder, you have seen the Gregory mind disturbed by the visitation of young Stephen Hands. It is not pleasant for a complacent intellect to be betrayed at every turn to its own unsuspected ignorance. Even little Sally Hands, for whom childhood itself had an appeal at once dutiful and deeply instinctive, found some difficulty in adopting Nicholas's 'chum' into her affections. This new young cousin of hers was neither beautiful like Nicholas nor tender like Little John, therefore in compensation Sally was particularly kind. When she told her stories to the children, Angela and Nicholas and Little John and any of their visitors, before bedtime on the big fireside sofa . . . it was cold enough for evening fires that April . . . she would drag Stephen down against her and try to induce him to rest his head, as Little John on the other side was resting his, against her shoulder. Little John felt soft and furry like a mole, and patted her arm with a small warm brown hand, but Stephen felt like an assembly of sticks and knobs and he smelled musty and the hinges of his glasses hurt her skin. But she persevered. 'He is a child,' Sally told herself heroically, 'a little, little child, only ten years old, and with no father . . . no mother . . . a poor little lonely wistful trustful heart . . .' Sally's thoughts ran in long reels of such adjectives.

'I should say,' the 'trustful heart' would interrupt with an outrageous snuffle . . . Stephen never blew his nose but on request . . . 'that these handsome fellows you're so soft about, Cousin Sally, with enchanted swords and fairy gifts, must of been about the biggest fakes in history. If I'd been a princess I'd of stuck out my tongue at um and uv married the first chap honest and brave enough to kill a dragon with his own hands . . . or brains.'

'You wouldn't make a very pretty princess, Stephen Hands, nor a very nice one either, I should say,' remarked Hesther Anne with surprising acerbity. She was astonished at her own moral backslidings during the big boys' visit. It was much easier to be like Thomas à Kempis and other devout Christians, ancient and modern, when Nicholas was not there to hurt her feelings by his sweet-tempered detachment or his untimely gayety, and when there was no Stephen to contradict her loudly, to pick up her mistakes or to confuse her with unanswerable, deeply impious questions.

'You're a clergyman's daughter,' Stephen would begin, straddling like Apollyon across her path, 'so p'r'aps you can tell me what Jesus was like in Heaven before he was borned of a Virgin and what he was doing with himself those days?' or, 'Why did God wait to save the world until the time of the Cæsars or why, since He'd waited that long, didn't He wait until America was discovered and give the Indians a chance?' or, 'If you made up your mind to be bad all your life and then got sorry and believed in Christ just at the end, you'd be saved, wouldn't you? And the Lord loves a sinner that repents better than a good man, doesn't He? Well, then, He'd love you better if you had been bad and sorry, wouldn't He? Then, to be loved a whole lot, more than any one, you'd just have to be extra bad and extra sorry, wouldn't you? Then what's the use of being good, eh? You're a clergyman's daughter, so I should think you'd be sure about such things.'

Oh, Stephen, horrible, embittering, confusing, alarming, provocative of anger and of tears, what, they asked them-

selves helplessly, did their star-eyed Nicholas see in this creature that he should introduce into their midst the gnome-like, spectacled inquisitor? Mary Greene clacked and clicked and went muttering of 'spankings that were due and overdue.' Martin grinned with a certain unusual grimness and his broad palm itched. Caroline twisted her thin pink upper lip. She did want Nicholas to make attractive friends at that expensive boarding-school. She wanted him to do his family credit. She hated taking Stephen to church that Easter Sunday. Kaaterskill would be really interested in the boy from Saint Tome's. She had boasted more than once of the sort of parents that sent their sons to the school. And now . . . this dreadful creature, who snuffled with his nose and shuffled with his feet, whose one suit was patched and spotted, whose stockings came down his thin shanks over his shoe-tops, who had but one handkerchief, it seemed, in all the world and that of an indescribable complexion, whose dingy dusty hair stood up on end, who writhed and made involuntary sounds and faces, who bit his finger-nails, who stared, breathed audibly, and had a voice like a saw! Poor Caroline! Later she found her 'line' and was able to dramatize to her own satisfaction Nicholas's noble kindness towards a poor little charity pupil, but, that Easter Sunday, she pushed her visitor into the darkest corner of the pew and spread her skirts over him and hid him with her elbow or her big prayer-book and hustled him away early, you may be sure.

In fact, Stephen had almost all the detestable tricks possible to neglected childhood. Besides the ones above-mentioned, he cracked his knuckles, ground his teeth, and scratched his head with his queer strong dextrous hands. He stammered when he was excited, and, as if these personal peculiarities were not enough to make him an unwelcome presence in any well-conducted household, he carried with him a sort of penumbra of confusion and untidiness. He brought things into the house and kept them in his pockets or under his pillow or in his bureau drawers — or other

people's pillows and bureau drawers — things and creatures, those that crawl, those that fly, those that hop; also, those that sting. The keynote to this strange child's character was a quivering and absorbing interest in every actual thing. Life to Stephen seemed to be merely an object, or a series of objects, to be passionately examined. He had dingy little notebooks in which he wrote up the history of his observations . . . the reactions of a spider to a strange environment. what a toad did under a sudden light, how the toes of a tree-frog differ from the toes of his swamp-brother, what sort of stones were found on the mountains of Kaaterskill, what sort of birds sang or didn't sing in the Kaaterskill trees, what sort of trees grew in the Kaaterskill woods, what sort of flowers sprang from the Kaaterskill soil. And his conversation was almost entirely a matter of quick loud questions and of breathless attention to replies, of What? Where? When? and Why? of How? How many? and How much? . . . for the most part, alas . . . unanswered. Nobody knew anything, it would appear, about reality, and nobody likes to be detected in such ignorance. Joseph especially resented being crowded into a corner and having it demonstrated to him that man on all fours bends in at the middle of his limbs whereas the joints of his creeping brothers, the dog and the horse, seem to behave in exactly the opposite fashion. Joseph could not explain the phenomenon, grunted in a high disdainful key and pushed the paper on which Stephen had pictured the problem . . . >< (man), <> (beast) from his carefully creased knee. Later, Stephen arrived at the solution, however, and immediately ran to acquaint Cousin Joseph with his discovery. He jog-trotted all the way from Nicholas's house to Little John's and without ceremony burst into that dim and awful book room. It was five o'clock of a cloudy afternoon, and Cousin Joseph, just back from a musty idle day in New York, was at his accounts. Stephen crowded in upon him, pushing the sacred volume out of the way. Joseph had just written neatly, 'Ther. 45 degrees. Unseasonably cold. Broke my thermometer and had to pur-

chase a new one. Thermometer \$.50. Sundries.' The word 'sundries' in red ink ended in a long smudge where Stephen's elbow brushed it . . . the first and only smudge in all the ten careful volumes.

'Look a-here, Cousin Joseph,' cried Stephen in his loudest, harshest voice, 'you couldn't tell me, but I can tell you now. Your elbow is up under a dog's shoulder, and your wrist is a dog's knee, and the lower part of your palm is a dog's sort of fetlock, see? And, same way, your knee is that queer little point just below a horse's stomach and your hip is his high-up one and your ankle is . . .'

'And my knee,' quoth Joseph with a sudden biting energy, his hand springing upon the ruler, 'is a convenient place for an impudent boy to be laid across and this is the portion of *your* anatomy where I, as your cousin and your senior by many years, am about to make a scientific and long-overdue experiment.'

The incident was always one of Joseph's favorite anecdotes, for he had rarely been so apt and coarsely humorous or so promptly executive. For an instant the Bittering blood had been on top. Nor had he ever performed so popular an execution. Even Cousin Sally approved of the castigation, though she gave Stephen candy as soon thereafter as she met him. Stephen's spectacles fell off and were broken and his legs flew about and he howled in a thoroughly human and natural fashion, and was heard by Mary Greene, sent up from Maple Lane to fetch him for supper, to wail out, 'Oh, ple-ase tell me, Cousin Joseph, why? Why? Why?' but presently without inquiry, 'I'll be go-od, go-od, go-od,' like any other penitent.

Mary Greene was fervently delighted with what she heard and saw . . . for the study door had been left open by Stephen, and she went on tiptoe and home without her charge, to tell the story of his downfall.

Poor Stephen would never have said a word of this misadventure. He crept off into the woods, a shaken and sobbing little seeker of the truth, half blind without his glasses and

thoroughly disorganized. He had never been beaten before, had hardly indeed been aware of his body and its sensitiveness. He crouched down in the woods with his head in his hands. Besides being conscious of his insulted body, he was aware of wicked hitherto unknown emotions, of sick rage and helpless agonies of shame. A strange man to strike him and taunt him and throw him about . . . for nothing, for no reason, for telling him about a thrilling discovery, for running almost a mile to tell him about it. And he had no father to go and beat the man for striking him. No one cared . . . no one . . . no one . . .

It was dark when Nicholas, coming with an anxious whistling among the trees, found him. The whistling stopped. Nicholas ran a few steps and knelt beside his huddled weeping friend.

'Don't you care,' piped Nicholas, his eyes shining through the dusk, his arm across the thin round shoulders. 'Mary Greene told me. Uncle Joseph is a bully. He's always licking Little John, you know, for nothing. Some day we'll get even with him. He'll have to pay for your glasses, anyway, and that'll get him *some*.'

It did . . . witness the Journal and Expense Book . . . 'New spectacles for Stephen Hands, broken during a well-deserved punishment. \$5.00. *Exorbitant*.' The underlining is Joseph's own.

Before the end of that Easter vacation Stephen visited the woods again, and this time saw to it that neither Nicholas nor the God of Consolation Himself, walking in the cool of the day, should find him. He hid himself in a thicket behind some rocks.

It was Sally Hands that drove him there; Sally, the quick-hearted, who never, if she could help it, hurt any living thing. She had been chatting to Caroline in the little parlor before the lights were lit, talking about a hundred harmless matters, about Aunt Abbey's letter . . . such a wonderful clear letter for an old lady . . . and the illness of poor Anna Farralee; about Martin's rubber factory and its great pos-

sibilities and Sally's own valorous investment in it; about Angela's perfections and the virtues and failings of Miss Brend, the English governess, soon to be dismissed in favor of a 'finishing school'; and so, presently, by way of servants and their absurd demands for higher wages — Mary Greene was already getting ten dollars a month! — and their resentment at a little confusion and additional work in the house — to Stephen Hands.

'Much as I miss Nicholas,' said Caroline, 'I'll be glad when the Easter holiday is over and that precious friend of his goes back to school.' She spoke ruefully and with laughter, and a small unseen figure, collecting scattered wood-lice and hundred-leggers by the 'feel' from the corner of the sofa, lifted a listening head, its spectacles glimmering faintly in the vague light. It was about to rise and steal away when Sally spoke . . . and this — remember — was the same golden-haired Sally who, first woman in his life, had succeeded in teaching Stephen to snuggle against her and to let his head rest on her soft, smooth shoulder. Hadn't she guessed what she had done to him? Perhaps . . . but even the most love-instinctive are not beyond the influence of other instincts. Sally gave herself an audible shake.

'Poor Stephen. He is a disgusting little object. I can't bear to touch him,' she said, and her pleasant, throaty, cheery voice was quite changed by the sincerity of her repulsion.

The wood-lice were carefully collected and restored to the pill-box and to Stephen's pocket, but the hundred-legger roamed at large. His captor would have gone his way unobserved had not Caroline's sharp ear detected the faint sound of released sofa springs.

'Who's that?' she asked. You . . . Nicholas?'

'It's me,' said Stephen, and he heard Sally draw in an anguished breath. He added instantly, very harsh and loud, 'I didn't hear a word you said,' and shuffled out of the room, stumbling at the threshold.

That evening, at fairy-story time, Sally went hunting and

calling about the garden and the fields, calling with tears in her voice for 'Stevie . . . Stevie . . . Little Steve . . .' but Stephen was in his new-found lair among the rocks. He had tried to hang himself with his dirty handkerchief. Many a boy of his age has made the attempt and a few have horribly succeeded, but Stephen was clumsy and only fell and bruised himself quite badly so that pain diverted him from his original purpose.

He loved Cousin Sally Hands. He loved her, loved her. He would always love her. He didn't care if she thought he was a disgusting little object. Oh, how he cared! How he cared . . . ! No, it was better not to love any one at all . . . only Nicholas, a boy like himself. Better not to think or to care about people. There were always things . . . things . . . things . . . You didn't have to love. It didn't matter. He'd got along very well before he loved Sally. Only, she had put her arms around him and had held him close. Why did she do that if she thought he was a disgusting little object? No doubt because she was sorry for him and thought he knew he was disgusting and she wanted to help him to forget it. She would never have said that if she had known he was in the room.

Why was he a disgusting object? What did she mean? He must look at himself and see. No, he wouldn't do anything of the kind. Yes . . . he would. He was no coward. He'd find out about himself just as if he was an animal or a plant . . . an insect . . . Sally hated insects. He'd find out about it and forget it. He wouldn't love any one else. He'd just keep on being interested in things . . . things . . . things. People could love him if they chose, beautiful people like Nicholas. But he wouldn't care. He'd be as hard as stones and hurt them. He'd hurt them. He'd hurt Nicholas who was not disgusting and whom Cousin Sally loved. No, that was caring again. He mustn't care. It was ugly to care and it hurt. He didn't care that the boys at school didn't like him much and called him names like 'Double-Eyes' and 'Toad' or 'Bugs' and 'Stinks.' That didn't make him un-

happy. Nicholas, the finest and the smartest boy in the Lower School, had made a chum of him anyway. And he had his collections . . . Stephen's hand caressed the pill-box. His pain subsided. He was composed when he came back into the house and ate the supper that had been saved for him. He explained his absence to Mary Greene — he'd 'got lost in the woods' — and hardened himself against her scornful 'Humph!' He didn't show her the great dirty bloody scrape on his shin which might have softened her.

Without waiting for Nicholas, who was playing in the yard with some friends, he went up to bed and took a hot bath of his own accord and without assistance, blew his nose enormously, and getting into his cot, turned his sad little scrubbed face to the wall. He had not shed a single tear, but it was as though his young spirit had been through a major operation without anæsthetics and had changed its shape unalterably.

During that agony was born the eventual meticulous dandy and the remorseless pursuer of women. Having with infinite scientific pains reformed as far as possible his personal defects, he was bound forever to put his physical powers to the test. Was he still, in the eyes of beauty, a disgusting little object? Or was he not? . . . a lifelong secret personal doubt insoluble and unsolved; to any ordinary observer the most baffling fact about that extraordinary personality, detested, acclaimed, and in some quarters passionately beloved — the future Mr. T. Stephen Hands.

BOOK II

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL

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THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL

CHAPTER I

TWO SONS AND TWO FATHERS

JOSEPH GREGORY was a man of his word: there can be no question of his entire honesty of purpose. In the performance of anything which he conceived to be his 'bounden duty,' he was extraordinarily and almost naïvely exact, but in matters of psychology and the finer aspects of moral values, like so many other exact men, he did not see clearly and was capable of profound unconscious deceptions both of others and of himself.

He did really scrimp and scrape and save with the avowed purpose of sending his son to a university. He did really go without the things he needed: a doctor, a new furnace, some small remedy, and the table at the Homestead was ill-provided, though well set out with the delicate porcelain and handsome old English silver. Joseph would not raise his servants' wages to keep up with the increasing demands of labor, so that he lost his good old-fashioned domestics and was forced to employ greenhorns or useless old fools who broke and wasted and let things run down into a secret disorder. He saved a good half of his income by such methods, however, every year . . . which was not in the least necessary, and, though he would not have admitted it, perhaps was never aware of the fact at all, he enjoyed his scrimping vastly. There was no possible pleasure he renounced that could compare with the rapture of renouncing.

Joseph Gregory was afraid of life. He had always been afraid of it: of his own passions, of the exercise of his reason, of the cravings of his intelligence. He had been afraid of adventure and of experience. The world's taboos had hedged

him about thornily, the world's God of Judgment had imposed upon him a conviction of hell-fires. Life must at one time have burnt this sensitive and serious spirit in such a fashion that it had gone lame and blinking ever afterwards. All this timidity, all this excessive apprehension had gradually focussed itself upon one immediate perpetual dread . . . the dread of a material loss. The fear of risk, the fear of giving, the fear of emotional expenditure without adequate return, had translated and symbolized itself into an inordinate care for money. It seemed to Joseph that his meager possessions stood like a frail wall between him and the unnamable vague terrors of the universe.

Undoubtedly money is and always has been a symbol of deeper and more mysterious processes than mere barter and exchange. To Joseph it was associated with his love, with his ability to marry Sarah Hands, to keep her in ease during her brief life, to comfort her illness and to make decent and beautiful her death. It was associated with the birth of Little John. If Joseph had not been able to afford the best of nurses, Little John would not have lived at all. It was associated with the upkeep of the Homestead, his familiar necessary shell, fitted to his spirit as a turtle's covering is fitted to its back. Money would protect and cover the approaching defenselessness of his old age, money would educate John. Money would save the boy from unimaginable temptations, sins, disasters, would enable him to marry a nice girl like his mother, would make it possible for him to maintain the Homestead and the Gregory traditions, after his own death.

Whenever the slightest portion of his 'means' became subtracted from him, all these memories and fears and hopes were profoundly affected, his general sense of stability, of continuity, suffered a determinate loss. A little pain shot along his nerves. It was as though a pinch of his actual flesh had been torn from him. He had allowed himself no other interests, he had retired from his profession, withdrawn more and more from social contacts. One small financial

venture, which he had made under Martin's prompting, having failed, he was frightened out of his wits and immediately thereafter squatted down on his belongings like a clucking hen upon her nest, nervously kicking away her treasure out of sight, hot-eyed at any threat of deprivation.

It was not Joseph's habit to be hopeful. He envisaged the worst, expected it, died its small death a thousand times. He was a very serious man. To his own conscience he daily and with pains justified his smallest acts. If he found himself in a wrong, he at once set about the righting of it. He forgave his enemies . . . generally people who had overcharged him, such as Green the grocery-man or Tons the butcher. He hated nobody. He loved nothing . . . except the memory of Sarah Hands. Oh, yes, he did love Little John, but that love was so overlaid with anxiety and undermined by apprehensive suspicions, that his son was more a possibility of anguish than a human being. Some day, if the boy was 'spared to him' . . . Joseph's head was stuffed with such platitudinous phrases . . . if he were successful, if he did nothing abominable in the eyes of God or man, if he married wisely and made an honest living, a 'competence,' why, then Joseph would be at leisure to love him. That would be happiness . . . superhuman, immortal, and untroubled security being the requisite for Joseph's surrender to his loving. Sarah had attained security. She was asleep in God, and Joseph could afford to love her.

It was during these passionate and secret years that he definitely retired from the old New York law firm of Gregory and Hands — his wife had been the daughter of a former partner — selling out his interests to younger blood and concentrating on what he always spoke of as the 'management of his affairs.' One would have thought that he really had affairs. At least he spent hours over his account books and his papers. He cautiously invested his savings in solid bonds that paid the lowest possible rate of interest.

He taught Little John for two or three winters, and then, finding him far behind other boys of his age, he sent him to

be tutored by a gentle dilettante named Oliver Wade. This mild old wastrel had never been able to do anything for himself, but lived in a paradise of 'Culture' and was supported therein by a bitter and energetic daughter who kept a primary school below-stairs while he communed with the great minds of the past above her head. He did not help her in teaching the three R's, but he did consent to 'bring Little John forward with his Greek and Latin and mathematics and history.' Little John, so long accustomed to the urging of a ruler, relapsed at once into his natural mental indolence. He found Mr. Wade restful and lovable. While the old delicate-tongued scholar babbled and circumlocuted, Little John comfortably dreamed. They sat for these soothing periods in a sunny little bedroom, its bay window looking out on a view of the nobly faring Hudson. Mr. Wade, tall, white-haired, pink-cheeked, sat deep in a wicker-chair, a book balanced on his long lean knee, his very clear blue eyes lifted above his glasses and his pupil, while his lips, rosy between a clipped white mustache and pointed beard, neatly articulated the words he loved. When he was not discoursing, he read for his own pleasure, making little clicks of delight, and set John interminable tasks to do in silence.

Little John had an easy-chair with cushions and a sewing-board laid across the arms for a writing-desk. He sat where he could watch the broad bright day step across the water and the hills, and he would read a paragraph or so, then let his brown head fall back in order to memorize the matter. For a few moments his sweet-tempered lips would move conscientiously, then any observant master would have seen them relax into the small soft smile of reverie. At such moments Little John looked a lovable overgrown lad with his ruffled hair and soft eyes . . . too sensitive, altogether too tender . . . the color would come up into his face as he lounged there happily. This sunny serene eyrie was a great contrast to the dark chamber of horrors from which his education had so recently emerged. And yet he respected the strange anxious father and feared him, and it was only when

he thought of him that he would jerk himself away from the vague dangerous roads of reverie and pull his short dark eyebrows together to bend over his book. Little John's conscience was his father with all the penumbra of associations of which the word 'father' was a symbol. It was like the gigantic shadow which follows a tiny child's body up the stairs to bed. It had no weight, he could not be aware of it, but it was there, fastened to the heels and shoulders of his spirit.

Nicholas and Stephen were, no doubt, testing their sinews in rivalry with their peers and enduring savage hurts and torments, or rejoicing in no less savage joys, but for Little John there was a soft twilight sort of existence in which he discovered two delights, one, the joy of a fisherman, the other, that of a reader of books. He learned to fish one day from a stray angler by the Kaaterskill. It became his passion. Every holiday — and he had many — was spent with his rod along the mint-bordered, clover-touched pools and running shallows. In the evening, sitting under a lamp with his father in the Homestead living-room, he read. Volume after volume spilled its contents into his memory. His father liked to see him there. He would look over at the round brown head propped on its thin brown hand and the blunt profile still with its small-boy look of meekness and feel a profoundly tender wish to stroke his head, but, catching Little John's liquid absent eye, he'd let his own brow drop, sigh heavily, shift the position of his legs, and contrive to look stern and sorrowful. Little John left much to be desired. He was no student, he lacked ambition . . . a good boy enough, conscientious and obedient, but he would never set the Hudson River afire or do any great credit to his father's infinite pains and sacrifices.

By the time it came to entering Princeton, Little John had to be taken in hand by an expensive professional tutor who made him study for the first time in his life and got him through his examinations by the skin of his teeth . . . and dug a grievous hole in Joseph's painful, pleasant savings.

While Joseph lived upon half his income, Martin was busily engaged in using every cent of his capital and every cent besides on which he could lay his broad red hands. Kaaterskill was like a pleasant little pool into which Martin stuck his finger and stirred. He stirred up mud and sand and unsuspected life and the pool overflowed its banks and killed its flowers and began to do a deal of muddy and promiscuous irrigation. The factory grew. It made rubber toys and rubber balls, it made bicycle tires. A herd of dark-faced foreign-speaking low-bodied slaves came to labor in its rooms. Martin started the Cedar Grove Recreation Park where the slaves spent, in gayety, in soft drinks, and in Ferris Wheels a large part of their wages. He built a branch railroad to blacken the roofs of Kaaterskill and to go trundling and banging and hooting through the very fields of the Gregory Homestead he had loved. And on the round top of Signal Mountain, the hilltop he had looked at as a small boy awake to the dawn, he built a hideous big hotel to reach which a funicular scarred the mountain-side, and where on summer nights a band blared and a double row of lights inflamed the sky. This Signal Mountain Hotel became the object of a popular New York excursion; city shopgirls and their young men visited Kaaterskill and went singing and laughing up the Main Street in the open trolleys. The town sprawled and stretched in rows of identical little houses cheaply constructed to the right and left of the old village Main Street, now blossoming into innumerable saloons. The houses came up to the Homestead gate and squatted there so that Joseph, hearing the factory whistle scream at six o'clock, could hear also the clatter of departing factory hands and the noisy Mediterranean shouts of their offspring. They stole truck from his garden and eggs from his hen-house so that he had to buy a great big ugly dog of whom he and Little John were much afraid. It seemed as though Martin, who had so loved the Homestead, took pleasure in insulting and scarring it as a man might take pleasure in defaming the mistress he has lost.

Martin's own new house, however, was set well out of the reach of this tentacled monster, his own Kaaterskill. It had its back turned to the town and the factory chimneys and the raw scarred mountain-side, and looked tranquilly out across the unscarrable river. It was the Caroline Simpson palace, realized.

'The Caroline Simpson woman' herself whole-heartedly rejoiced in the success of her husband. She had had much to do with its achievement. She had grudged no effort and no sacrifice to help him during the barren striving years when Kaaterskill and the Gregorys had stood out against his ambitions and desires. His opponents had been the objects of her furious hatred, his few supporters had been the idols of her praise. Now she took delight in rewarding the one and punishing the other. She dealt out her favors very grandly and her chastisements with no uncertain hand. It would be difficult to say which made her the more disliked. She had rapidly become the little great lady of the place. 'I have been faithful over a few things,' she told herself, 'so I have been made ruler over many things.' She visited the sick factory hands and donated some money, raising more, for a hospital. She gave great lawn-parties and great solemn unwieldy dinners, and little garden-fêtes and small dinners, discriminating in her invitations in a fashion that set the whole place by its ears. She founded the Active Ant Industrial School so that daughters of factory hands and townspeople might be trained for efficient domestic service . . . she meant efficient domestic service in her own household, though she didn't say so. The waitresses and chambermaids and kitchenmaids of 'Rosewreath' were always the pick of the Active Ant graduates, but the cooks and butlers came from New York. The Ants were glad to work for her without wages, as six months at Rosewreath were considered the final course and an assurance of future high-paid employment.

Caroline was a famous housekeeper. She was up early to see that others did not oversleep. How she loved bustling

and scolding, bullying and praising, training and engaging, dismissing and paying off! How she loved the gossip and the tittle-tattle, enjoyed her prejudices, took sides with the housemaid against the waitress, with the second man against the butler or with the cook against the world! She rejoiced in leading Angela to expensive dressmakers and having her voice trained and her artistic ability cultivated, and she sent her to smart exclusive schools and encouraged her friendships with the daughters of smart exclusive people. These maidens came home with Angela for their holidays and spent weeks at Rosewreath and were duly impressed, no doubt, with its magnificence and duly also, no doubt, turned up their young correct noses at the vulgar noisy little woman who chose to flatter and to entertain them.

They began very soon to fall in love with Nicholas, in spite of his three years' juniority. At first it was, 'What a cute thing that yellow-haired brother of yours is, Angy!' And then it was, 'But, my dear, why didn't you tell us about your brother? Isn't he the best-looking youngster!' Angela would open her glittering black wet eyes.

'Tell them about Nicholas?' She couldn't understand the necessity. Nicholas was not interesting. Besides, there was something wrong about him. Angela had a sure eye for fallibilities. She detected the fly in Nicholas's social amber. He was queer. That's what Nicholas was — queer.

She didn't dare hint it to her mother, but she was entirely convinced. Nicholas did not excite himself about the 'things that matter.' Nothing changed him in the least. All the money now lavished on his education, all the travels, the advantages, the correct clothes, left the essential Nicholas as untouched as did the idea of a fourth dimension. He never did anything in the least awkward or conspicuous, he was a creditable athlete and got through his examinations without any especial effort, he was perfectly pleasant and at his ease with girls and young men, with dogs, children, with old people, and with trees. But he indulged in curious valueless intimacies, wasting hours of his time with old men of no

social importance, and smoking cigarettes innumerable in the linen-room while Mary Greene sorted out the clean clothes, and squandering his attentions on such an insignificance as Hesther Anne Hunt. He had never, for instance, ceased to interest himself in his penurious cousin, Stephen Hands, who had not, however, been invited again to visit the Martin Gregorys. Nicholas went about his own business without any revelation of his motives or intentions. He was occasionally seen with disreputable acquaintances. He never excited himself over the rise in his father's fortunes, over his sister's social triumphs, over his own prospects as the future partner in the Rubber Business, the Signal Mountain Hotel, the Cedar Grove Recreation Park, and all the marvelous rest of it. Even when he became one of the first young men in an American university to own a motor-car and to drive it himself, he seemed to accept the expensive mechanical miracle as though it had been a part of him, as, for instance, a centaur might accept his own hindquarters. He was not particular about Angela's young men nor critical of them. He was never a tease or a nuisance. But he was — when all is said and done . . . Angela came back to it . . . QUEER. She could not feel his charm. She could not love him. She would often have liked to hurt him had it been possible to hurt Nicholas. There was that in him which was the enemy of her soul. Sometimes she fancied that he was profoundly unhappy and that enraged her. She was so pleased herself, so complacent. She could do everything so well. She knew she would marry brilliantly and live in New York and fashionable summer places and that her name and picture would be familiar to society columns. When the time came, in fact, she chose her prey and ran him relentlessly to earth. From the first day her eye glittered upon him, he was lost.

One morning in the garden at Rosewreath, in that very marble pavilion, in fact, once imagined by Martin as he passed in bitter exile the gate of the Gregory Homestead, near the lake with swans, Nicholas came upon this predestined victim of his sister's, gnawing the fingers of indecision.

Gaanse . . . he was one of the Knickerbocker Gaanses and heir to the Gaanse and Trevor fortunes, a handsome, full-blooded-looking man near to his thirties with the wide hard brows of a young ox . . . had been suffering through a white night from a nicely calculated dose of jealousy administered by the object of his near-matrimonial intentions. He was now at this matutinal hour in half a mind to 'quit.' He imagined, that is, that he was in half such a mind, although, of course, at this stage, nothing would have forced him to 'quit' but Angela on her knees with white outstretched arms ready for surrender. But Gaanse did not know this. Angela did.

Nicholas, who had been swimming, came down the path whistling, his collar open, his hair dark with wetness, a towel over his arm, his bare feet thrust carelessly into a pair of shabby tennis shoes. The sun was just up over the trees and the swans stood side by side in the still lake in love with each other and their reflected beauty. Nicholas caught sight of young Ripley Gaanse and he stopped his whistling. There was real anguish in the hunched figure of this early riser gathered into a big lump on the balustrade of the pavilion, gnawing at its knuckles and scowling at the innocent swans, so like Angela, when you come to think about it, with their long white necks and their black narrow eyes.

Nicholas, seeing Gaanse through the pavilion columns, was reminded of a captive thing, and the liberator in him awoke. He contemplated the prisoner for an instant as an untroubled god may contemplate a mortal.

Then he came closer. 'There's a seven-fifteen, Gaanse,' he said softly. 'I'll motor you down and see that your things get sent after you.' He put his wet head on one side and laughed softly. 'Better not wait . . . Better not wait.'

Gaanse lifted his head and stared. He had very big prominent gray eyes. He flushed, half smiled, and decided to be angry.

'Go back to your room, kid,' he said, 'and mind your own business.'

Nicholas went off soundlessly in his rubber-soled sneakers. Around the corner of the path he began again to whistle, but in a minor key. A caged bird is a sad spectacle enough, but a caged bird unmindful of an open door is the saddest of all spectacles to the lover of liberty.

Angela's future husband never quite forgave Nicholas for this quite uncharacteristic bit of interference . . . perhaps because he so often wished he had taken the 'kid's' advice. Gaanse was engaged for matrimony by Angela the following Wednesday night after a theater-party in New York when he had had just the right amount of champagne and Angela in a lovely low-necked orchid-colored gown had refused to allow him to kiss her on the shoulder. Angela was twenty-three and very beautiful in her glittering black-and-white fashion. The Gaanse-Trevor circles were not displeased, and as for Caroline, on the morning when Angela's telegram reached her, she sprang from her bed and in her pink night-gown went dancing like a mad flamingo about the bedroom, her tawny hair flapping about her shoulders, and sang 'Ta-ra-ra-ra-boom-de-ay' at the top of her shrill true voice. Martin, who had seen her before in moments of unbridled triumph, watched her from his pillow, amused rather than startled by her transports.

This year of Angela's engagement and marriage was a very costly one for Martin. His family expense book would have made Joseph shudder. There was a vast amount of entertaining, of motoring into town, of dressmaking; and the final ceremony was a dazzling and enormous affair. Yet it was shortly after Angela's marriage when Nicholas chose to write this letter to his father . . . 'I wish you'd give Johnnie a fat check, Father,' he wrote in a handwriting rather like himself, upright and detached. 'Uncle Jo keeps him so close that the poor kid can't spread his feathers. Johnnie is going to be very popular. He's not a bit fresh or pushing and the men like that. He'll probably make one of the good clubs . . . but he's got to have some cash. He can't return things, nor belong, nor do any of the things the other

men do. It's rotten tough luck for him really. There's no use in your asking Uncle Joseph to loosen up, I suppose, so can't you let him have something? something "substantial," as poor Uncle Jo would say. He won't take a cent from me. You can make it up some other way. I don't really care for this car, for instance; it gets me into all sorts of fool parties in town. I drink too much and it makes me sick. Men I don't really care about pick me out for invitations because it's so easy for them to let me run them into town. And it's hard to refuse when I'm about the only fellow here with a car. Do you see?'

Martin always laughed and swore to himself over Nicholas's letters. They were odd documents as from son to father, casual, without either respect or impertinence . . . it was as though the boy didn't care what Martin thought of him. Sometimes they hurt. He knew that Nicholas was 'wild,' that he indulged in champagne parties and other more questionable diversions. Angela brought to both her parents all sorts of rumors. Ripley had heard this and Ripley had seen that. It was a mature edition of her childish urge, 'Aren't you going to spank Nicholas, Papa?' Caroline mounted the ladder on her forehead and stood out for discipline, for a cutting-down of allowance, a curtailing of some promised pleasure, a strict tutoring during holidays. But Martin kept to his early resolve. He never interfered with Nicholas. He didn't understand him . . . for he knew with a blind intuitional certainty that Nicholas's wild oats were a strange crop springing from a Martian seed. They had no relation to his own youthful vagaries and even less to his own present and secret occasional indulgences. For Martin had his own visions of sugar-plums, though they were different from Caroline's.

He did not answer Nicholas's letter, but he made Little John a very 'substantial' gift and didn't repay himself by confiscating Nicholas's car.

It may be imagined what that gift meant to John Hands Moore Gregory. It gave his system a shock of rapture, of

release and of alarm. He understood perfectly that it made his father furious, although Joseph contrived to disguise the fury from himself and to convert it into the customary channels of reproach and apprehension. He foresaw therefrom and predicted in discourse and on neatly written pages the 'ruination' of his son. Little John himself was afraid of money. The check went uncomfortably to his head like a glass of golden fizzy champagne. He managed, after returning some immediate social obligations and paying off some rather urgent debts, to control his giddiness. But even with control the latter part of his freshman year in contrast to the first was a period of such light-headed expansion as he had never imagined in his wildest dreams. He bought himself white flannel trousers, gay ties and hatbands, expensive buckskin shoes, a grand fur-collared topcoat. He sent presents to Mr. Wade, to Hesther Anne, to every one he loved. And he became suddenly and sweetly cognizant of 'girls.' He invited Hesther Anne to the Freshman Prom, where she appeared looking very pretty and dizzy and good, and, though she was by no means a belle, she was perfectly satisfied, for Nicholas danced with her several times and a correct and clever Junior, with a beautiful physique and a delightful voice, made love to her. His name was Stephen Hands and when he took off his glasses and looked ardently into her face, she discovered that he had a magnificent pair of long-lashed amber-colored eyes.

But . . . but . . . but . . . as though to support the theory of Joseph that pleasure may be sin and that it is better to go into the house of economy than into the house of expense, the gift of gold did bring about an eventual disaster. Towards the end of Little John's sophomore year, not twelve months later, he indited the following letter to his 'Dear Papa':

I know [he wrote in his cramped and anxious hand], you will be awfully distressed and angry with me, but please let me have three hundred dollars right away. I am in debt and am very much worried because the tailor that made me a dress-suit which I really needed,

because none of the men went to that dinner without having a dress-suit — it was out at the Cranes' — people you would like me to know — is threatening to go to the Dean, and there is a bill at the florist's for fifty dollars . . . I know you will love the girl some day when we are both old enough . . . and another one, not so large, however, at Renwick's. I know this will surprise and grieve you very much, but I can assure you it will never happen again. I could make some very good excuses and I will explain it all to your satisfaction when we are together, but I am cramming for exams and awfully worried. It is very urgent about the money, please.

Your affectionate son . . .

JOHN

I am awfully sorry and ashamed and I know how much you have sacrificed in order to send me to college and scrimped and saved and gone without things. I know that I am not worth it, Papa.

Joseph sat at his solitary breakfast when this letter was brought to him. In order to understand its effect upon his spirits, it is necessary immediately and completely to forget all about the effect of fizzy golden champagne upon the brain of twenty, all about the pretty dizzy eyes of Hesther Anne; in short, all about the feelings and doings of life-intoxicated young people.

CHAPTER II

A KNOCKING AT THE DOOR

WHEN, after a wakeful night of fear, a man is roused from a moment's forgetfulness by an unexpected thundering upon his door, he wakes in a sweat with pounding pulses certain of he knows not what disaster. That letter of Little John's confessing to a debt of three hundred dollars, telling of a tailor's threats, hinting of an 'entanglement with a woman' (every sex affair except one of strictest matrimony along conservative lines was an 'entanglement' in Joseph's vocabulary) . . . acted upon his nerves like such rappings at a dreamer's door. He read into it a thousand things behind the simple, almost childish surface sense of it. It confirmed instantly, absolutely, his deep instinct for disaster. Every fear became a certainty. He pushed away his coffee-cup with a shaking hand and his face became pale. Seeing his servant's eye upon him, he groaned aloud and put his hand to his heart.

'My Gawdamassy, Mistah Greg'ry,' cried the colored woman, now his general factotum, 'is yo' sick?'

'No . . . no,' panted Joseph, unconsciously reproducing his own design for a stricken father, giving in fact the final performance of a thousand imaginary rehearsals, 'get me a glass of water . . . plenty of ice in it, please, Milly. I've had bad news . . . bad news.' He groaned again. Three hundred dollars. The income at three per cent on ten thousand dollars which might conservatively be called the savings of a lifetime . . . swept away, spent upon . . . what? A dress-suit, pastry, flowers . . . What criminal selfishness, what unnatural ingratitude. When had he, Joseph, bought himself a new dress-suit? And flowers . . . fifty dollars' worth of flowers, sent to a woman! What sort of woman would involve a lad of nineteen in such extravagance? Only one kind,

indeed. She flamed scarlet to Joseph's vision, painted, full-bosomed, bold and terrible. He must go at once and snatch Little John from her clutches and save him, body and soul. Yes, he must be stern and sharp and resolute. He had failed somewhere in his training of the boy, in arming him against temptation. But wasn't it, after all, Martin's fault, with his devil's gift of money? Again Joseph groaned and wiped his forehead as Milly came running with the water. He had told Martin that the gift would be the ruination of Little John, body and soul, body and soul . . . he had used the very words.

Joseph got up from his chair feebly like an old sick man, Milly watching with her thick mouth open and her eyes going about like black-and-white wheels, and went over to the mantel where he kept his time-table stuck into the frame of the mirror. At first he fancied he could not read, but presently he got his glasses arranged and, leaning the paper on the mantel, steadied it sufficiently to make out that there was a 10.05 for New York and a fairly good Princeton connection if he skipped his lunch. As if a father in his state of mind could eat anything! He went up to his room and in a febrile hasty fashion put a few necessities into a shabby little square brown bag, and called from his window in a weak disastrous voice to George Garvery to harness Peggy to the yellow wagon for the train.

That journey on the hot June day along the edge of the blazing river, across the melting tarry streets and out through the green Jersey fields and woods, became a nightmare memory. Joseph suffered again not only the few real griefs and losses of his life, but all the dismal ghostly procession of the imagined ones. He looked aged by ten years when, hollow and faint, he got out of the hack at the archway entrance to the dormitory and climbed feebly up the cool concrete steps to Little John's room.

It was five o'clock already, and Little John was out. Joseph went in through the heavy old timber door and shut it. Now that he had come upon the scene of crime, he

revived a little. He became feverishly brisk and ruthless. The desperate energy of the sleuth possessed him. He would 'get to the bottom of this wretched business,' he would 'leave no stone unturned to save his son,' he would pull up by the roots every shameful secret of his life, he would thoroughly cleanse this place of its devils and drive them out with righteous indignation and sorrowful necessary rigor. He would upbraid Little John and rouse his soul to a full awareness of its guilt and force him to penitence and a resolution towards a better course. He would first thoroughly chasten him, set his feet on the right road, and then — God and his mother helping — he would forgive him. He would try earnestly to forgive him.

Muttering such proverbial phrases, Joseph began to open the bureau drawers of Little John. He went through them carefully, and through his small square trunk and through his wardrobe and his desk. He read his letters and examined his photographs and opened his pocketbook and rifled the pockets of his clothes, hanging like so many limp defenseless Little Johns behind the curtain in the corner.

By the time Joseph was through with his investigations, it was beginning to be dark and he lighted the lamp. It was eleven hours since he had tasted food and then only a mouthful of cereal and half a cup of coffee. Hunger and his discoveries helped to turn him honestly faint. He felt that he 'could do no more.' On Little John's narrow iron cot he had laid out the evidences of his discovered extra guilt: a foolish letter from a youthful matron of the place asking him to come and see her while her husband was away, the crush-notes of a college-widow . . . to Joseph both correspondents wrote in the hand of the scarlet woman . . . a photograph of a creature in a very low-necked gown leering through her unnatural eyelashes into the very face of John's dear smiling mother, a score of duplicate whist, evidently played for money . . . Little John had written down his losses, amounting to one dollar and fifty-five cents, in the margin . . . a vast pile of cigarette butts from the waste-basket and an empty

bottle which smelled horribly of beer. All these articles strung out on the bed made an exhibition to shake the soul of a fearful recluse like Joseph Gregory.

When, after an anguish of patience during which his nerves suffered indescribable torments, he heard his son's step on the stairs, he staggered into a chair and exaggerated, rather unnecessarily, his haggard look of physical exhaustion, of grief, and of reproach. First he would harrow the boy's feelings and then he would, severely, in some fashion yet to be determined, castigate him. He must be both just and, remembering Sarah, merciful. But justice must come before mercy. Prepare the boy for punishment by laying bare his heart of its callous protective coverings and then smite as with the ruler, again . . . again . . . again. Time enough for mercy when repentance was assured. But, Joseph told himself, the experience would 'bring his gray hairs in sorrow to the grave.'

CHAPTER III

THE QUALITY OF MERCY

AT about nine o'clock of that June evening, John Gregory, Sophomore, stepped out of a restaurant, where he had been indulging in ham sandwiches and beer, upon Nassau Street of Princeton and fell into the embraces of two friends. Three abreast and arm in arm they strolled along the pavement. Little John could not help but be happy in spite of the shadow at his heels: the arms of his friends lay warm across his shoulders, the June air of this small hillside town was sweet, roses were blooming in the gardens, the elms were in heavy leaf, their shadows spattering the golden light along the paving-stones. Everywhere there were sounding the eager, ill-regulated voices of youth, footsteps rang merrily, girls lisped and chuckled like running streams, now and then a friendly professor in passing would shed upon him that ironically tender professorial smile, 'Hullo, Little John,' 'Good-evening, Gregory.' Princeton was full of guests, of alumni, of girls, of mothers, fathers, sisters, cousins, aunts. It seemed to Little John, his heart swelling, that the bells rang with an especial glamorous tenderness for youth. There would be a moon before long. Its light was to be felt vaguely along the housetops and the wide heads of the trees.

As they came abreast of the college buildings they heard the singing and the big bell began at that instant its full-bodied chiming . . .

'Don't you hear those bells?
Don't you hear those bells?'

the Seniors were asking in soft chorus.

'They are ringing out the glory of the year . . .'

John and his friends turned in and slouched beneath the nearest elm to listen. The green grave space under its

architectural trees was thronged with a silent tender-minded crowd, half seen in the dusk. The boys, with their mothers' eyes upon them, were singing away these last full hours of boyhood.

'Where, oh, where are the grave old seniors,
Where, oh, where are the grave old seniors,
Where, oh, where are the grave old seniors?
Safe now in the wide wide world.'

Little John had a queer shivery fear for them all. Safe? Safe in the wide wide world? If he, John Hands Moore Gregory, could only stay in Princeton forever! He had forgotten his fears — the miseries of his strangeness, his timidity, the confusion of his spirit, his feeling of entire inadequacy, the sense of inferiority, his despair of himself. Now, at this moment, thinking of those others who would be 'moving on,' he felt safe. He had friends and an alma mater and a sweet, well-regulated procession of hours. And there were the dear gray walls and towers, the books, the green-shadowed stretches of turf, the sweat of sport and the cool rest that follows it.

A single tenor voice lifted itself suddenly higher than the towers.

'Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine.
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not ask for wine.
The thirst that from the soul doth rise
Doth ask a drink divine . . .'

The voice, so very high and clear, seemed to be climbing up above the reach of that very passion it sang of, to touch its crystal lips to some starry goblet, cold as space. There was no heat of human yearning in it, only a yearning infinitely stranger and stronger, like a cold moony rising tide.

'That's Nicholas Gregory,' some one piped at Little John's elbow, 'the Senior that took the leading man's part in the Triangle Show, Father, that awfully handsome boy with yellow hair, do you remember?'

'He's the son of the rubber Gregory, isn't he? The chap that has made a fortune in tires? Kaaterskill plant?'

'Yes. His sister was married to Ripley Gaanse last year. Maizie went to the wedding.'

'Lovely voice, hasn't he?'

'They say he's awfully wild . . . that he just escaped being expelled this year . . . wouldn't it have been a shame?'

Little John moved away, his face hot and his heart thumping uneasily. Nicholas . . . awfully wild? What rotten lies people repeated! Nicholas! And the silly girl, evidently babbling to an interested 'Papa,' had rather liked her epithet. She'd been 'thrilled' over Nicholas's reputed wildness. How asinine these girls were sometimes. And about Nicholas who didn't really care a straw for any of them. Senior singing was marred for Little John and he went back to the street and thought he would get his pipe and look up Angela and Cousin Sally. They'd be round at the Inn very likely and he wanted to see them, especially Cousin Sally. She had looked the 'cutest thing in the world' at the game, years younger than that beautiful matron Angela Gaanse: Sally with the pink of an eighteen-year-old in her face under a hat with violets, and her big blue eyes shining and not a thread of silver in her yellow hair. Forty-five years old. Why hadn't some fellow married her?

Little John crossed a dusky quadrangle where a square of yellow light shone from under an arch and went swiftly up the shallow steps to his own room. As he came near to the door, he saw that there lay a thread of brightness along its threshold.

It seemed to Little John that even before he saw that light he had known that there was some one in the room and his step, knowing it, had grown slow and heavy. Must he walk out of all the warm light-hearted normality of June-day youth into the familiar nightmare condition where all the unimportant things were huge and weighty, the way one's hands felt in a fever, and all the large elating things did not exist at all? He knew that there was tragedy behind his door,

but here where youth was important the tragedy seemed absurd, hysterical, diseased. Let him once turn the knob, however, and the well-remembered horrid enchantment would convince him and convict him and agonize him as of old. In plain words, John knew that his father was inside the room, and of the father, and all that the father stood for, he was afraid. He faltered back three or four stealthy steps, heard the legs of a chair scrape, and, swallowing a throatful of cold saliva, ran quickly up and threw open his bedroom door.

'Hullo, Papa,' said Little John with a great show of cheerfulness as he came across the threshold.

His eyes were not as brave as his voice: they flew about the room carefully avoiding his father, realized vaguely that the place was in disorder and came back fascinated several times to a queer row of articles upon his bed. At last he forced them to reach Joseph, who had been waiting motionless for this to happen and, instantly, John forgot everything in his concern.

'Papa,' he cried and ran over to him, 'are you ill?'

Joseph looked up haggardly, droopingly, from under a distorted brow.

'This morning I received your letter, John,' he said in an unnatural voice.

John straightened from his posture of concern and took away his hand half reluctantly from his father's shoulder.

'Y-yes,' he faltered. 'I — I knew it would upset you, I — I am awfully sorry, Papa, and . . . and ashamed of myself.'

In mediæval times, no doubt, people, quite rational and serious people, traveled in a real fear of enchantments, never knowing when a chance meeting with Merlin or Morgan le Fay might not bring about the unrecognizable return of themselves or their loved ones in the guise of a frog, a bluebird, or a black bitch. No more sudden and remarkable a transformation was ever devised by these remote agencies, however, than that which Little John's consciousness suffered during the first three or four minutes after his

entrance into his own room. Outside of the door, three short steps behind him, he had been a man, a person of distinct importance to his peers, a student, respected and beloved, an athlete of promise, the member of a powerful and coveted organization, looked at with eyes of reverence and envy by several hundred younger or less successful men. He had besides been favored by two beautiful women. Now, in a flash, in a breath of time, he had become . . . what? A little wretched frightened boy, ready to burst into sniveling tears, with, so his artful sensations told him, nothing between him and the direst physical disaster known to childhood but a pair of tiny knickerbockers all too easily detachable.

'Let me get you something, Papa,' he faltered. 'You look . . . awful.'

Joseph raised a shaking hand, waving away this useless concern about his inevitable condition.

'I have been afraid of . . . this,' he said and there was something particularly calamitous in his use of the demonstrative pronoun. 'I have always been afraid of this. Now my worst fears have been realized.'

'But, Papa . . .'

Joseph did not interrupt, yet Little John found himself unable to complete his justification, his excuses slipping away from him like shallow water.

'Yes? I am listening. I will hear you out.'

'It's only three hundred dollars,' croaked Little John.

Only three hundred dollars! Only three hundred dollars . . . the unlucky phrase went echoing against the walls.

'Who and what do you imagine yourself to be, John? The son of a millionaire? The son of a rich man like your Cousin Nicholas? Have I not . . . ?'

Little John began to recite hurriedly in unison with his father — 'sacrificed and saved and scraped . . . ' who, however, carried on longer with — 'gone without every pleasure and luxury and comfort, denied myself many things I really needed . . . ? No, no, my son, you must not sit down nor turn away. You must in common decency . . . it seems to

me . . . stand there and listen to me. You must hear me out.'

Joseph's voice was stronger and he had quite forgotten his initial promise to hear John out. In fact, he was beginning to be angry. The sight of Little John in a white shirt and well-cut flannels and buckskin shoes, with a gay tie round his neck and the latest fashion of parting and brushing down his hair, roused in Joseph a feeling of envious resentment. All through that day of his own anguish, this young fellow had been gadding about light-heartedly in gorgeous apparel unmindful of the suffering he caused.

At the half-snarling lift in his father's voice, Little John stopped his fidgeting and stood as still as a soldier. His blood began to pound at his wrists and temples. He was conscience-stricken in sober truth, but having tasted liberty, he told himself now behind his teeth that he was no dog to be told to stand there in such a fashion and in such a tone.

'I am glad your mother is not alive,' groaned Joseph, quickly translating his rage into something more pathetic and more justifiable.

Little John flinched. He, on his part, had always been afraid that his father would say that. He had a vision of the memorial window, of Hooker, of Thy Faith and Fear. The beautiful girlish brunette color faded a little in his cheeks.

'I trusted you,' Joseph went on brokenly.

'Why were you always afraid, then . . . ?' began John, to be instantly interrupted. In fact, from this point on he was never allowed to finish a sentence unless he shouted it.

'But I know now that you are not to be trusted. I am bitterly disappointed in you, John.'

'You just said you were always afraid of . . .'

'I am prepared at no matter what sacrifice to pay your debts. I have looked over your papers —' John started and the color returned to his face. 'The tailor's bill amounts to one hundred and ten dollars. What did you tell me is the entire sum which you owe?'

'Three hundred,' mumbled John.

'You have added a deliberate falsehood to your other faults. The amount as I make it out is exactly three hundred and twenty-five dollars and seventy-eight cents.'

John began to stammer something.

'Ah, I suppose to such a magnificent youth as you have become, twenty-five dollars is a negligible amount. When I was your age it represented my entire yearly allowance. I would not have been suffered to omit in it my accounting of expenditure to my father, I assure you. Even at this time twenty-five dollars seems to my ignorant and inexperienced eyes a considerable sum.' His voice dropped to a hollow note. 'I have been accustomed to invest exactly that amount yearly on the anniversary of your mother's death in flowers for her grave. This year, by your fault, her resting-place must go undecorated. Part of your punishment, my son.'

The subject was too sacred for protest, but John felt its melodramatic injustice most acutely. He was ashamed for Joseph and lowered his eyes . . . a signal too often overlooked by complacent elders.

'This young woman, however,' went on Joseph bitingly, 'has not been deprived of floral decorations.' He took up gingerly from the bed, Exhibit A, the photograph of Little John's 'entanglement' . . . the college-widow.

'I found her on your bureau beside your mother's picture. She seems to be wearing a gown that shows quite half of her naked bosom . . .'

John, who had never observed this anatomical fact, felt, at the mere suggestion of it, the blood leap to his heart and he turned white.

'She's a wonderful girl,' he began harshly. 'Miss Susan Jay . . .'

'Hush,' his father commanded. 'I have read what I now know to be her letters. She speaks' . . . again his voice dropped with an indescribable effect of revelation, 'of your kisses. Yes, my son, you may well blush and hang your head in shame. Before your mother's picture . . . on your bureau . . . Tchh! Tchh!' But in his use of the homely clucking

syllable there was nothing homely. It was a cry of spiritual loathing and despair. 'And here is another letter' . . . a faint perfume unfolded in the room like an opening flower, as Joseph spoke . . . 'another letter, more seriously wicked, where a woman invites you to her house at night . . . to visit her . . . during her husband's absence. John! John! John!'

'Papa! Mrs. Jessup . . . every one knows Nina Jessup.'

'I am . . . that is . . . certain of it, my son . . . every one who is not fastidious concerning his acquaintance.'

'She . . . she's lovely. She has the noblest influence on every man that knows her . . . She . . . she . . . It wasn't at night . . . nine o'clock! What right have you to read my private letters?'

Joseph stood up, locked his hands behind him, and straightened from the waist up. He was still a trifle taller than his son and he made the most of his inches.

'I will not suffer one word of impertinence from you,' he announced, 'not one word. You, a boy of nineteen years, are not to question my right as your father, morally and financially responsible for you, to investigate your belongings, which in the eyes of the law are mine by right of purchase, and, in your best interest, to discover every secret fault and vice and to drag them into the light and to upbraid you for them, yes, and to punish you whenever and however and with whatever severity I may find it necessary and wholesome to do. I will not allow you to question or to censure me.'

This time it was Little John's tongue that turned coward. His eyes remained fixed valorously upon his father's face. They were blazing with defiance and with rage.

'You have brought me very close to the edge of a collapse, my son.' Joseph, finding that blazing fixed look hard to bear and remembering how weak he was, returned heavily to his chair. 'I have traveled since early this morning. I have had neither bite nor sup. I have suffered unspeakably. I have agonized over you. I have' . . . he shaded his eyes and his voice quivered, 'I have prayed for guidance and for counsel.

There, on your bed, is the ample evidence of your wicked, selfish, spendthrift course. Cigarette-smoking . . . drinking . . . gambling . . .'

'Papa! . . . Really! Duplicate whist. Every one . . . Nicholas . . .'

Joseph looked up quickly and in triumph.

'Ah, ah, ah . . . so it was Nicholas who led you into much of this mischief.'

'No, Papa,' cried Nicholas's loyal cousin in anguish, 'it wasn't Nicholas. All the men . . .'

'Allow me to believe, for the credit of human nature, my boy, that there are in this great and beautiful university a few pure and sober and honorable lads who are here with the sincere purpose of improving their mighty opportunities, who are assiduous in their studies and who know better how to employ their leisure than in wine and cards and . . .'

Joseph left the third employment written upon the air in scarlet silent syllables. 'I have heard rumors concerning Nicholas.'

'He offered to pay my debts, Papa . . .'

'Quite so . . . to cover his own tracks, no doubt, and to help you to deceive your father as he has succeeded in deceiving his.'

'That simply isn't . . . true.'

'You are calling me a liar, John?'

'Oh, for God's sake!'

'You have learned to swear?'

Little John bit his lip furiously and the tears came into his eyes.

'I am glad to see you are capable of shame.' Joseph was somewhat calmed by the sight of John's tears and the acute and flaming distress on his features. Some of the hard coverings had been effectually removed . . . certainly the jauntiness had been completely torn from that youthful figure in its gay tie and well-cut flannels. 'Let us try to control ourselves, John, my dear boy, and to discuss this miserable business calmly. You have forgotten much of all

your dear mother wanted you to be, much of all I have tried so painfully, at the cost of how many wakeful nights, to teach you. But you must not forget that you are a gentleman. You must not lift your voice to me, nor call me a liar, nor swear at me. Are you . . . that is . . . I mean . . . prepared to apologize and to control yourself?’

Little John with his teeth in his lower lip was silent.

‘Are you prepared, I say, to apologize and to control yourself?’

Still the rigid silence.

‘I am exhausted, John. I have had a terribly day. You are my only son, all that is left to me in the world. Remember that. I have nothing . . . nobody now but you. Are you prepared to . . . ?’

‘Yes. Yes. I . . . I apologize. I — I won’t . . . I mean, I will . . .’

‘Very good. No, don’t look about for a chair and don’t turn away your face. I must have you there in plain view in front of me. It is the least you can do now, to obey me in so small a matter.’

It was not perhaps with shameful tears on his lashes, so small a matter, but John obeyed.

‘Now . . . for my strength will not hold out much longer . . . I will tell you to what decision, after much anguish and much prayer, I have come. I will pay your debts.’ He waited.

‘Thank you,’ muttered Little John.

‘Some day when it is too late you will realize what this has meant to me. Will you bring me pen and paper, please, and something to rest on. I don’t think I can get over to the desk.’

Joseph making a point that Johnnie should see how shaky were his fingers . . . and they were really very shaky indeed . . . made out in tremulous writing, the necessary checks. He then chose a piece of paper.

‘I am about to write to Miss Susan Jay,’ he said, ‘enclosing her letters to you and warning her against any further correspondence with you.’

'Papa!'

MY DEAR MISS JAY . . . [Joseph wrote and read simultaneously with a calm judicial deliberateness], My son John Gregory is a boy of nineteen and entirely dependent upon me. From now on his allowance will be quite inadequate to such frivolous expenditure as the purchase of flowers, candy, and theater-tickets. As, I imagine, these are the prime interests of your life, I imagine also, that you will be indifferent to any youth unable to furnish them. I should advise you therefore to discontinue any further intercourse with John. He is a poor man's son and has his way to make in the world. It is absolutely necessary that he devote himself exclusively to his studious pursuits. I am returning these rather imprudent letters and your photograph which I find inappropriate to the bedroom of a college undergraduate. I hope you will destroy all three of them. John will some day no doubt be able to understand better his own foolishness and yours. I am, my dear young lady, sincerely and in the deepest and most paternal sense, your well-wisher,

John's father . . . JOSEPH GREGORY

'As for this other letter, Johnnie, it goes with me at once to the President of the University. I hope he will see fit to warn other young men of the danger of such associations. Perhaps he will call upon this unfortunate Mrs. Jessup herself.'

Joseph got up languidly and collected his little bag, his hat and gloves and stick.

John meanwhile had walked hurriedly over to the door and stood against it. As his father came forward he spoke.

'I am not going to let you do it, Papa,' he said breathlessly.

'What are you saying?'

'I won't let you mail that letter to Sue. It — it's disgusting. It puts me in a position . . . don't you see? And . . . you can't take my private note from Nin — from a perfectly nice woman who has the noblest influence over every man that knows her . . . to the President. He'd think me the lowest sort of cad and he — he'd laugh at you, Papa. You ask me to be a gentleman, I should think you would want to behave like one yourself.'

'You don't know quite what you are saying, Johnnie. You will be very sorry. Can't you trust me to do the right thing for you and others? Surely I am the judge of what is fitting for you. Don't you suppose that I with all the worldly experience' . . . and Joseph really believed he had had worldly experience . . . 'of my fifty years am capable of just decisions? This is not a grown-up situation. You talk of 'men and women' as though any of you were out of your teens. You should all, every last one of you, be soundly spanked.' Joseph laughed. He was in a better humor now that he saw how keenly his chastisement was hurting John. He was almost ready for the little tender scene of forgiveness. In soberest truth he wanted to take the wild-eyed, white-lipped boy into his arms and cry over him.

'I won't let you go out with those letters, Papa,' panted Little John.

Joseph came up and put a hand on Johnnie who, thrusting him almost violently aside, stretched an arm across the door immediately afterward. Joseph staggered, reeled, and recovered himself. He had lost his inclination for laughter and forgiveness.

'Let me out at once, sir.'

'No . . . No . . .'

Joseph lifted his stick and, laughing indeed, but in another key, he struck Little John heavily upon his wrist, the one extended across the door. With half a cry the young man jerked back his arm and his father went past him instantly, threw open the door and slammed it behind him. John, holding his aching wrist, ran after him down the steps. Out in the quadrangle, however, Joseph was pushing through a group of men, and John, unwilling to be seen almost in tears, begging against his punishment, turned desperately and crept back into his room. There, after flinging himself about in an indescribable turmoil of shame and distress, he came against the edge of his cot and stumbled over on it, where he lay stretched bodily on top of all the evidences of his profligacy and, smothering his head in the pillow, burst into the weeping of a defeated child.

Joseph Gregory went across the street to a restaurant where he propped himself against a table, his cane clattering to the floor, and in a nearly inaudible voice ordered from a scared black man broiled ham, two fried eggs, and a cup of strong coffee.

As he ate and drank he began to be vaguely conscious of his surroundings. The disordered blood quieted itself along his veins, his heart beat more vigorously, his vision cleared and the realities of life came back into perspective much as his surroundings gradually right themselves before the eyes of a recent rider on a merry-go-round. He began to feel vaguely, unwillingly, that the scene he had just been through, though sincere enough in its emotional substance, had been largely melodramatic and insincere in its outward manifestations; and at the same time every instinct in him reacted definitely against the method he had improvised, under the stress of emotion, for the humiliation and punishment of his son.

All around him here at the marble-topped tables were joyous or quaintly serious young men, bright-eyed and instinct with youth's hopeful and pathetic dignity. They seemed to Joseph, physically revived and suddenly tender, so many Little Johns. The boy had been foolish and extravagant, certainly, but there was nothing fundamentally wrong with him. He had looked at his father with the honest and clear eyes of his little boyhood, he had stood before him very meekly until the last bit of childish defiance, he had been sorry for his fault.

Joseph slowly took out the letters he had written, laid aside for future mailing the envelopes enclosing the payments of John's debts, and deliberately tore into many small pieces the others containing Susan Jay's photograph, his own note to her, and her romantic letters, and that scented sheet from Nina Jessup, matron of twenty, whose husband was temporarily absent. Joseph then ordered a plate of fresh strawberry ice-cream and ate it with a lightened spirit. He had forgiven Johnnie. He had spared him an acute humilia-

tion. Sarah was certainly content. Joseph almost felt the radiance of her smile. He would not go to see the President. He would take a late train to New York, spend the night in the city, and get on up to Kaaterskill early the next morning. It wouldn't do to see Johnnie again, because in his present humor he would be altogether too indulgent and spoil the effect of discipline, but, once home, he would write a long tender fatherly letter to the boy and tell him he had thought better of his note to Susan and his appeal to the President . . . that he fancied Little John had been sufficiently punished and trusted that the painful experience would be profitable to him in the future and that never again might it be necessary for either of them to suffer any such misery.

In New York at an inexpensive but very respectable hotel, Joseph slept profoundly. It was not only Little John whom he had forgiven.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRE OF TRUTH

UNFORTUNATELY it takes a tender and reasonable letter quite as long to travel by the post as any other sort of letter, so that Little John, by his father's postponement, was condemned to at least forty-eight hours of misery. He spent the night in a feverish condition of despair and the next day in writing letters to Susan Jay which he destroyed unsent, in telephoning to Mrs. Jessup and hanging up the receiver in a panic when Central at last succeeded in getting her, and in starting out to call on the President, an impulse which never took him any farther than the foot of his own stairs. He had only to visualize that sardonic eye and long upper lip to scuttle back to the shelter of his own four walls. He locked his door and shaded his window from his friends and ate nothing but some cracker fragments from his bureau drawer. Perhaps he was not so unlike Joseph because several times, sitting in his chair with his head in his hands, he caught sight of himself in the mirror and that reflection seemed to him a fitting image enough of heroic young despair. After two o'clock in the afternoon he fell suddenly asleep and woke at four with a clear head and in a mood of abrupt decision. He wrote a letter, arranged his disordered person, and set out to find his Cousin Nicholas. Now that he had come to his tragic resolution, he found necessary the sympathy of his own kind.

The day was cloudy and much cooler; all the young life and light seemed to John's jaundiced eye to have been abruptly extinguished from the gay little university town, the very towers stood like piles of penitential stone, the bells rang dolefully, and the voices and laughter of the street came hollow and pretentious to his ears. Nicholas's window, however, at the corner of some building, its gaudy Japanese silk curtains billowing a welcome, spouted with unquestion-

ably genuine mirth and music. There must have been at least a dozen occupants, young men and women, each one of them, thought Johnnie scornfully, squandering in a minute enough laughter to provide a mature well-regulated man with material for the polite necessary risibilities of a lifetime. He flinched from that riot and stood, a pathetic figure enough, white and slim against the green turf and the gray wall, balancing for and against flight, until a face appearing between the curtains caught sight of him, when the window filled at once with other faces and there was a chorus of summons and reproach.

'Hi there, Johnnie, where have you been hiding? Ain't he the exclusive and haughty student? Didn't you want to see me, Mr. Gregory? I's hurted bad, I is . . . Come on up, Gregory, old man. "Take a plenty and eat a hearty." Look what Nicholas's giving us . . . Yum . . . Yumm . . .' And just behind, the plink-a-punk of a banjo . . .

'My gal's a high-born lady,
She's black but not so shady.
Feathered like a peacock just as gay . . .
She was not colored . . . she was born that way . . .'

A wan smile like a weary ghost just before cock-crow flitted across the face of John. He made a faint gesture of resignation and, entering the little Gothic doorway, came by way of a timber staircase to that corner room dedicated to revelry. It was crammed from wall to wall. Amongst the crowd of flushed and sparkling faces, John made out the softness of Cousin Sally's eyes and steered his way to her in a mood of panic, an infantile need of petticoat protection.

'Why, Little John, dear boy, where have you been? I went to your room and it was all quiet and dark and locked . . .'

'I'm so sorry, Cousin Sally . . .' He let her hold his long chill hand in her warm heavy little one while she worried over him and, thus supported, he greeted Angela and her scornful husband, said 'Hullo' to his acquaintances and to

Nicholas sitting on the window-sill with the breeze in his yellow hair, 'how d'ye do'ed' the small belle in blue and the large belle in lavender, muttered 'I'm all right, Mary, thanks,' to a sympathetic ugly popular young woman, and ended with 'Let up, will you?' to Stephen Hands who had been chanting tunelessly with his unyouthful gift for irony . . .

'I love not man the less but Nature more
For these our interviews in which I steal
From all I may be and have been before
To mingle with the universe and feel
What I can ne'er express but cannot all conceal.'

'I haven't been mingling with the universe, Steve, and I'm no Byron, thank you. For pity's sake give me some toast and jam, lots of jam, please, Mary, and iced tea . . . Gosh, it looks good to me.'

To Sally's relief, for she had been frightened by his aspect which curiously recalled a little rigid figure pointing and shrieking something about 'It's God . . . it's God . . .' the color was coming back to John's face and a queer disorganized quivery look was leaving his sweet-tempered mouth-corners. 'What on earth has happened to him?' she wondered and wished he were her own boy. It would have been so easy to question him with his dear young brown head against her bosom . . . so easy and so unutterably sweet. She managed to whisper lightly with a smile and an anxious eye, 'Anything wrong, Little John? Bad news? Exams? Money? Can I help?' to which he gave a quick and troubled 'No, thank you, Cousin Sally dear,' and waded nervously into the hurrying current of exclamatory talk around him.

He was the only Sophomore present; these were lofty Senior circles and it behoved him to tread softly and with due respect.

His eye crept continually to Nicholas with whom he craved a private interview. The prospect was not encouraging. When was Nicholas ever alone? Little John wondered why, by sheer friction of social contact, that cousin of his had

not been already worn to shreds. His curious air of separate-ness seemed a sort of miracle, and that look in his eyes! How could he flirt with Amory Gray so artfully and contrive at one and the same instant to look straight through her . . . at . . . what? In the name of mystery . . . at what? When Stephen flirted he went at it as thoroughly as possible with, in fact, a scientific absorption. Of course he would have to. Girls had to be overcome by Stephen's concentrated and calculated brilliance, whereas they flew like moths blindly into Nicholas's unconscious flame. John wished girls loved him that way. It would be splendid to be Nicholas. Oh, in every way . . . so free of parental control, so delivered from timidities, so easily gifted, so rich. Never did Pilgrim start out for the Celestial City with so feather-weight a burden on his back. Poor Little John, wistful and pale, sipping his tea in Cousin Sally's shadow, rested the eye of affectionate envy on that Senior cousin of his until it all but filled with a pity, just as affectionate, for himself.

Angela said to her husband, 'John looks anæmic. I thought he'd be handsomer by this time.' Ripley cast his eye carelessly over his cousin-in-law, but did not waste his energy in comment. It would be impossible to imagine anything of less significance to the mind of Ripley Gaanse than this same John Hands Moore Gregory. He wished Angela had no relations. In-laws were a darned nuisance. He hated Nicholas. Thank the Lord, Angela didn't seem particularly keen on him herself, which was a mercy. Well, only half an hour more of this 'college-boy stuff' and he could get himself attached to the steering-wheel of his new automobile and be on his way back to 'Little old New York and the life.' What a bore these tittering female infants were . . . (mercifully Miss Gray and Miss Parker couldn't hear his thoughts and fancied that they were rather attractive to the silent handsome banker) . . . and as for that Sally Hands woman . . . Good Lord! Would he some day be expected to have her in the house, with her gushing ways and her wearisome sentimental attentions to everybody's comfort? Nothing

was so unspeakable as an affectionate old maid. Why the devil didn't Angela snub the creature? She was entirely capable of snubbing.

'I don't want to hurry you, Ripley,' said Nicholas at this point, 'but if Angela and you don't want to be skidding on wet roads, you'd better start. It's going to rain like the devil.'

So did Nicholas deliver poor flushed and fidgeting Sally from the unbearable fixity of that ruthless Gaanse eye and himself from a growing impulse towards the crime of manslaughter.

After the departure of the Gaanses, mirth became even less restrained. To Johnnie's exhausted spirits the room seemed a bubble swimming in confused colors and humming like a crystal top. If he had had the energy he would have gone away, but it had become impossible for him to leave Sally and that low wicker chair with a cushion under his head.

'My goodness!' cried Miss Gray with a gush of laughter, 'look at John Gregory, gone sound asleep in the midst of all this.'

'He's tired out,' Sally Hands murmured. 'He must be feeling ill, I'm afraid.'

'Let's wander away to our dinners,' suggested Mary, 'and let the poor soul have his nap out. See you later, Nicholas. It was a splendid party. Thank you, too, Mr. Stephen Hands. You won't get anything as jolly as this at your old Johns Hopkins, will you?'

'Not unless you run down and see me sometimes,' said Stephen. 'Don't let me turn into a scientific fogey down there without an effort to save me.'

'I wonder if that's what you will be.' Mary's clever and penetrating eye ran over the well-set-up young fellow with his lantern jaw, big nose, straight mouth, and screwed-up eyelids. 'Personalities are like Christmas packages to me. I long to untie the ribbons and see what's inside. All you boys look like such nice clean tempting parcels. Oh, dear, I wish you were all hung on my tree.'

'We are, Mary.' The male chorus rose while Miss Parker with a glance conveyed to Miss Gray that she thought the sentiment 'forward.' The girls of nineteen hundred and four belonged to the plaster-cast school of maidenhood and were careful what they said. There were all sorts of things implied in Mary's speech which might certainly not be called altogether maidenly. To create a favorable contrast Amory lifted her soft eyes to Stephen's face and lisped prettily,

'You won't really go in for dethecting howid little objects, like wo-wms, will you, Thteve?'

'Yes,' said Stephen in the curious stern voice and rigid manner which came upon him always when he spoke of the real passion of his life. 'Yes, I will.' He put on his glasses and turned away.

Miss Gray knew that her butterfly touch had failed and she lost interest in Stephen. Her last look was for Nicholas. So was Miss Parker's, and so, especially, was Mary's. Poor Stephen had sacrificed another possible personal captive on the impersonal altar of biology.

Behind the chattering young backs, Sally, who held the belief that sleep without an extra covering invites rheumatism and colds, looked softly about for 'something to throw over' Little John. She found a piece of Persian embroidery at the end of the lounge and, undeterred by its magnificence, pulled it over for her hygienic and motherly intention. A paper fluttered with it and this she picked up and laid on the desk. It held, she saw, a few lines, which somehow in that noisy room laid a soothing hand upon her heart.

'I am the golden thread of continuity running through all. I am the seed eternal blossoming through all. I am the endless fire of truth stretching from planet to planet, from man to man, to the silence of the gods and beyond them into my ultimate silence, which is the energy of repose . . .'

It was Nicholas's handwriting, but could anything be less like Nicholas, the center of all that was noisy, confusing, febrile, and violently gay? Some of his studies, she supposed. What strange creatures these boys were, so much in their

heads, so little on their tongues, while in their eyes . . . ah, how Sally loved their troubled arrogant young eyes!

The eyes of Little John, sadly lacking in arrogance, opened on a dim room and on the outline of his cousin leaning against the window-sill. Outside the rain was falling heavily.

'Hullo, Nicholas. Did I really go to sleep? Has every one gone? Are you alone?'

Here was another John, a creature by his sensitiveness exceedingly subject to these embarrassing metamorphoses. He was perhaps now more nearly the real John, a loving and lovable being, timid and serious, inarticulate and unhappy. Little John, trying to express to this beloved Nicholas his misery and his experience and his intention, groped and stumbled, stammering, as was his way in such moments, and inserting such small phrases as he had learned from that other stumbler, Joseph Gregory.

'I'm awfully unhappy, I mean . . . you see . . . it's like this . . . I can't stay at Princeton any longer, Nicholas.'

The figure at the window came close and sat on the arm of Johnnie's chair.

'What rot are you trying to tell me, Little John?'

'I'm going back to Kaaterskill to-morrow . . . to stay . . . I mean . . . I can't stick it here, Nicholas, honestly . . . it's too awful. All sorts of perfectly rotten things have been happening. I can't tell you all about it but . . . Papa was here to-day.'

'Uncle Joseph? Why didn't you bring him round?'

Little John laughed faintly, rather like the ghost of Hamlet's father in a lighter moment.

'Bring him round? Oh, Nicholas, he was . . . well' . . . and here John had one of his astonishing attacks of whimsy, 'we were just like the Laocoön group with one of 'em missing . . . you couldn't decently have carted us around Princeton.'

Nicholas laughed at this comparison immoderately, but that was a certain tribute to the unexpectedness of Little John's sallies.

'I can't tell you what we were like, I mean . . . Papa . . . you know . . .'

'About the national debt? Well, I advised you, my son, to let me settle that for you. It's your own fault, Johnnie. He's paying it off, isn't he?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Well, everything ought to be O.K. . . . in that case.'

Johnnie groaned. 'I should say . . . not. He's put me in wrong with one of the finest women in Princeton and made me seem a cad. He's gone . . . I mean . . . Nicholas, I can't tell you . . . he's gone to the President with a private letter. Of course he thinks I'm a child and that he can read any of my private correspondence, but no one else would understand that nor excuse me on that account . . . I mean . . . There was a letter from Nina Jessup, you know, that is . . . about coming out to see her while Jeff was away . . . the sort of informal p-pleasant note she writes to a m-man.'

'Uh-hum,' grunted Nicholas and moved away from the arm of John's chair back to the window-sill on which he seated himself hugging his pipe-arm and blinking his green eyes like a particularly Sphinx-like cat.

'You don't mean he's going to take Nina's letter to the President, do you, Johnnie? That would be . . . Oh, he couldn't have done that.'

'He did. He d-did,' Johnnie moaned. 'He was on his way. Oh, I can't bear it. I'm disgraced in the eyes of the whole university. I — I expect Jeff will come and horsewhip me. I wouldn't blame him. I'd just have to take it . . . What would there be for me to say? . . . a man who shows his private letters from a woman and al-lows his father t-to t-take them to the P-President, I mean . . .'

Nicholas whistled, then laughed.

'Cheer up. That gentleman at Prospect must have had lots of experience with the 'high-sterical parent.' He'll know just what to say to Uncle Jo. Probably put him all to rights and send him home happy.'

'Oh-h, Nicholas, d-do you think so? And — and not warn any one, or call on Nina?'

'Of course not.'

'But what will he think of me . . . showing letters from a noble woman like Mrs. Jessup who is an inspiration to every man she h-honors with her friendship?'

Nicholas got up swiftly, lit his lamp; then, 'Is she all that, Johnnie?' he asked softly.

His cousin lifted a flushed face from his hands and stared incredulously.

'Have you ever talked to her, Nicholas? She told me herself that it was her influence that stopped Jim Hanscom drinking and that she had brought Stewart to the church. You knew he'd been confirmed, didn't you?'

'No. That is, I guess I did hear something about it. She's a pretty brisk little missionary, isn't she?'

'What will she think of me?' groaned John.

'She'll never know anything about it, Little John, of course. Do you suppose the President will take that massive brow and that upper lip of his to visit little Nina Jessup? And tell her about Uncle Jo's visit? He'll drop the letter into the scrap-basket and he'll smile a dry wise smile and he'll proceed to forget all about it. He won't go about warning the young men either. Rest easy about that. Once let him set his acute eye upon Uncle Jo and he'll understand just how he got hold of Nina's letter. Uncle Jo probably told him all the horrid details of his search.'

For an instant John's shadow lifted, but again it loomed across his brow.

'But . . . but that's not the worst . . .'

'Good Lord!'

John's voice descended to a deeper and more throbbing key. 'Nicholas, do you know . . . Susan Jay?'

'Don't we all of us know Susan Jay, Johnnie?'

John, looking curiously noble, shook his head as though, a strong swimmer, he freed his eyes from spray.

'I — I . . . well, Nicholas, it's all over now, of course, she will never want to see me again. She and I were . . . of course we're too young — but she had written me the sort of letter a woman writes to the man — she — she —'

Nicholas bent lower over the lamp and carefully adjusted its wick. He was thinking of the waste-basket of Susan's letters to another man she — she — But their perusal had left no tell-tale expressions on his face.

'Papa read them,' Johnnie went on half-sobbingly, 'he insulted her . . . I mean . . . Nicholas, I can't forgive him. He wrote her a really dreadful letter . . . well, the sort of letter no gentleman writes to a nice girl . . . and enclosed a beautiful picture she gave me of herself . . . it was really beautiful, looking over her shoulder rather like that Greuze, you know . . . and her letters to me . . .' Nicholas blinked rapidly . . . 'They were sacred . . . I mean, the letters a woman writes to the man she — she — well . . . they are sacred, aren't they?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, Nicholas, ye gods!' And here Little John got up and began to wave his arms and fling himself about the room in an alarming fashion, 'I couldn't stop him. I tried. It — it wasn't my fault. But she will never forgive me. She'll never, n-never, n-n-never . . . forgive me. She will think I showed those letters to him and let him think she was that sort of girl and she's got it . . . I mean, his letter to her . . . now, and she's read it. All to-day she's been hating me . . . and . . . crying probably over Papa's letter. If I feel the way I do, think how she must feel, what she must be g-going through, a sensitive young girl like that. I can't bear it. She'll never forgive me . . . never.'

The anguish of his voice shook the flame of the lamp so that a little spiral of smoke ran up the chimney leaving a black streak against the glass. Nicholas's voice fell, cool and reasonable.

'She won't take it that way, Johnnie. She'll be angry, of course. But I'm not so sure it won't do her good.' He paused, his eyes shone, deliberately smiling, upon his cousin. 'Susan needs a spanking pretty badly.'

John sprang forward with his fists clenched and Nicholas crouched from him in mock fear.

'Don't strike, Johnnie. Forgive me.'

'I won't let you speak like that of the girl I . . . I . . . Nicholas!'

'I won't. I'll never . . . so help me Heaven. I have loved Sue, myself . . . and so have Rogers and Rennie and Hal and all the noble Senior class. Will she not be a widow in a few weeks, poor girl . . . the widow of four hundred lusty men. "Ah, Susanna, don't you sigh for me . . . for Ah'm off to Alabama with the banjo on my knee."'

John's fist had fallen and his flushed face had a relaxed and battered look.

'But you see, Nicholas, with Sue and me, it's . . . different.'

'I guess it is, Little John.'

'She'll never forgive me, never, ne—'

'But she'll forget you and that's the next best thing to forgiving.'

John turned away to the window deserted by Nicholas and blind with rain. 'I don't want her to forget me like that,' he said in a muffled voice.

'Then you'd better not leave Princeton, Johnnie, for there are a good many other men in the university and Susan may console herself . . . unless you stay and keep your memory green.'

There was a silence after this and one could feel John's spirit hardening and ageing. That silence brought him by a long, long dusty road back to the beginnings of his trouble.

'It's not only Nina and Sue . . . it's the money, Nicholas. I'd rather give up the whole thing than . . . I mean . . . go on like this, m-making Papa wretched and ill and having horrible scenes, and b-being b-bothered all the time. He c-can't give me enough to get on with and it's h-horrid having him save and sc-crape and go without things. The truth is, I mean . . . I'm not up to this. I'm not like the other men.'

'How do you mean . . . not like the other men, Johnnie?'

'I can't stand the strain of being the sort of man I am . . . inside . . . and pretending to be . . . you see, like this . . . outside, the sort of man you are . . .'

'What sort of man am I?' asked Nicholas slowly and laughing, but with a queer suspenseful edge to his voice.

John's look rested upon him and there was that in its expression which recalled to Nicholas a little blunt meek profile lifted to a stained-glass window and to a figure moving lightly forward with wide ecstatic eyes. Nicholas felt shriveled at the heart, unclean and old.

'You can do anything, Nicholas, and be anything,' said Little John reverently. 'But, you see, the truth about me is . . .' He hung his head and Nicholas saw the blood rush up fiercely to his hair, 'I'm . . . afraid.'

'What of?'

'I don't know . . . everything. I'm better out of it . . . back at Kaaterskill. I've worked it out. I can study law.'

'Wait, Johnnie . . .'

'No, I wrote to the President before I came here and mailed the letter on my way. I'm going to Kaaterskill tomorrow. I can't stand the strain . . .'

'I can fix it all up for you if you will only wait . . . Think what it means, Johnnie . . . *Princeton*.'

'No. I've made up my mind.'

Nicholas looked rather hopeless, for he knew that when those uncertain and hesitant spirits, Joseph Gregory and his son John, at last spurred themselves to action, there were no more ruthless and pitiless performers of a deed. While he rummaged through his weary brain for arguments and appeals, he heard Stephen's tuneless singing on the stair.

'Oh, damn, there's Stephen. I never get you alone, Nicholas.'

'Tell him what you want to do, Johnnie . . .'

'Not on your life. He doesn't understand, well . . . feelings. He works like a machine and he sleeps like an animal and he has no use for "emotional indulgences." I heard him say so . . . said he'd rather get "decently drunk." He never has moods himself. And . . . and he doesn't take Woman seriously . . . he'd never understand about Susan . . . even you, Nicholas . . .'

 And Johnnie's voice quivered so that

Nicholas gave him a guilty and remorseful look . . . 'Stephen hasn't any heart . . . I don't see how you can like him so much. I've heard him talking to you and the other men sometimes. He never deigns to discuss things with me. I've heard him say' . . . John's voice dropped . . . 'that he doesn't believe in God.'

At that, Nicholas surprisingly gave his arms a great anguished gesture and with a ringing shout of laughter threw himself back into a low wicker chair. Stephen, coming in, looked shrewdly from a young man in riotous mirth to a young man who looked bewildered and about to cry.

'Get out, Johnnie, will you?' said Stephen without wasting an instant on greetings or apology. 'I'm dead beat and I've got to get some sleep p.d.q.'

Truly it would seem that he was not interested in matters of emotion. John left with what dignity he could muster, but with the air of a puppy whose tail has got well caught between his legs.

Before the door had closed on John's departure, Stephen was undressing with a precise speed which would complete his preparations in five minutes.

'What were you shrieking about, Nicholas?' he demanded. 'Little John didn't see the joke, I'm afraid.'

Nicholas was no longer 'shrieking.' He lay limply in his chair with an air of curiously profound exhaustion. 'There wasn't any joke. It was something about God and you and Woman . . . a perfect anti-climax.'

'Alice between the Mock Turtle and Gryphon, eh?' said Stephen irreverently. 'And Johnnie takes 'em all three seriously — except me, I guess.'

'He's afraid of you.'

'Poor kid! What's up? He looked like Niobe in her early youth before she had made her choice of a career.'

'I can't tell you . . . it's about "Papa" and money. He's going to leave Princeton.'

'You won't let him do that!' cried Stephen sternly.

'Am I John's keeper, Steve?'

'Yes. You are. Every one's John's keeper. He's a coward and, if he quits Princeton, he'll be a coward forever, until the end of his days. Once a quitter, always a quitter. Money! Why didn't he come to me? Money is the easiest thing to come by in the world. It's the last bugaboo that children shake off their backs. Why doesn't he work, summers, the way I do? I was a waiter last year.'

'The devil you were!' ejaculated Nicholas with some indignation. 'Why didn't you . . .'

'Because I didn't choose to. I don't think a thing of your rubber concern, anyway, and I don't like Cousin Martin. It's not your money and never will be by rights. I wish Johnnie had come to me. Why don't people come to me? I'd tell them the truth . . . and I wouldn't have laughed at him either. Why did you laugh?'

'God knows. Johnnie always makes me want to cry . . . so I laugh.'

Stephen, stripped and searching for his dressing-gown, threw him a look of scorn over his hard white naked shoulder.

'You'll never amount to anything if you spend so much time laughing not to cry and crying not to laugh, my son. That's like a woman.'

Nicholas blinked and laid his hands across his eyes.

Stephen found his gown and wriggled himself into it, his face unchangingly possessed by scorn.

'Don't you believe in God?' asked Nicholas, still with his hands across his eyes.

Stephen stared. 'What's that got to do with John Gregory?' He turned towards the bathroom. 'God is none of my business. There are lots of things I can examine and find out something about, but God is beyond me. As long as there is a "why" there must be a Because, I suppose, but . . . how the devil, to be obsolete . . . am I, finite, qualified to analyze infinity? I'm looking for the origins of life. When I've found 'em . . . or my great-great-grandson has found them . . . and the little beggar has got to be a biologist or I'll disinherit him

of my vast possessions . . . why, then I'll have found God.'

'No. You'll have found Man and you'll sit and look at each other until you both go mad.'

'All right. If that's the penalty of looking for the truth I'll just have to go mad.'

The bathroom door slammed. The room became profoundly still. The sound of the rain, slithering down the slate roofs of the dormitory, drumming the turf and fretting the gravel paths, took possession of the silence . . . coolness, incessant submission, a falling gentle voice. Just because of its inhumanity it seemed to have a message for the ears of man, a delicate ringing summons.

Nicholas, in his chair, began to show a trouble, a desire. He got up and moved about the room, his eyes awakening. He went over to the window, opened it wide and tasted the night air. It had a touch like crystal fingers, which seemed to lay wet hold of his and pull a very little. He had a vision of the dark lonely woods, dripping from green leaf to the dumb dense earth under the boughs, of the smell of restless imprisoned roots whose one expression is the branch out of their ken. The birds would be wakened by the rain.

He heard the sharp intake of Stephen's breath under the shock of his cold shower and then the cessation of that activity. Abruptly Nicholas left his window, flung a raincoat over him, and bareheaded, ran in his soundless sneakers out of the room, down the timber stairs, across the quadrangle, along the empty street and so, by way of a crossroad, down from the hill and across the streaming valley towards the wet darkness of reascending woods. There were paths here which his feet knew.

He mounted in an ecstasy, his face turned up to the rain. The trees rustled and ran about him, the smell was just as he had fancied it. The rain shouted its message and there was a fine roaring wind in the tops of the trees. Nicholas had shed himself and all the essential misery of self. He was part of the night and of the wind . . . delivered from shame.

A poem came to his lips . . .

‘Into the woods my Master went
And he was clean forespent.
Into the woods my Master came
Forespent with life and shame.
But the olive trees were not blind to him,
The little green leaves were kind to him,
The thorn tree had a mind to him,
When into the woods he came . . .’

The love of these brotherly and steadfast trees, so kind, so much kinder than his brother men, smote him to the heart so that he longed to speak to them as he ran, and tell them what was in his spirit, of gratitude and of release. If anything knew the quest and the lifting up of blind hands to the sky, it would be these, who spoke forever in low voices, through generations of dying men, of their own rooted restlessness.

‘We want Him,’ murmured the runner amongst the trees, ‘you who have to stand and I who have to run . . . we want Him and He does not answer us. Where is He?’

Nicholas came to the top of the hill. Here were scattered rocks looking in the darkness like vague crouching beasts. He stood straight among them and closed his eyes against the rain. The wind had stopped, the falling water made all the great indefinite noise of the night. Was it only in his own consciousness, only a trick of nerve-centers and sense-impressions, this mystery? This listening? Was Stephen right? Was there no answer to be sought for except by digging in the earth with dirty little knives and spades for worms and cutting them to pieces and talking about what they did and how they reproduced themselves? Wasn’t it on the mountain-tops, in silence, in submission, that man had come the nearest to finding God? . . . David . . . Buddha . . . Christ . . .

‘I can’t live without Him,’ murmured Nicholas’s wet cold lips under the rain. ‘Life without Him is a blind cruel game: childish, unreasonable, without dignity or peace. Who is happy without God? Why doesn’t He answer? Why

doesn't He come? Not in stupid symbols or in miracles or in doubtful human lives, so readily subject to withering analysis, but bravely so that He may be felt and touched . . . nearer than breathing, closer than hands or feet . . . Is He here inside of me, the spark that set the worlds to spinning down space, and still lives, has never for an instant tasted death, transmitting itself from one mortal body to another without any possible knowledge of mortality? How to become the glorious tool of that august transmitted and undying spark? To sit still and wait until a voice speaks and then, sure of its message, to stand up and give thanks and go down to the world with truth on one's lips and, speaking it, to die no matter how or when . . . there lies the only possible happiness for man. It would be easy to be a worm, not knowing it, but, given the consciousness of one's own horrid worminess, then there is no dignity if there is no relationship with God. Dog, the dreaming soul, has created himself his man-god, but man, more fully awakened, has gone beyond that simplest solution. He is breaking the gods of his own consolation. He is not content with his Wish-God, his Heavenly Father. He has gone crying and calling again out into the wilderness . . . 'I can no longer fashion me a god in my own image. Oh, God, speak to me or let me perish.'

Nicholas stood there as though his question had turned him into stone.

The rain stopped abruptly; the clouds pulled apart in the middle of the sky and stars disembarked from misty harbors into the midnight blue. It was warm now on the hilltop without wind or rain. Nicholas shed his coat, sat down on it cross-legged, and watched the little drifting stars. He had become suddenly quiet, content to watch and wait. There was an answer coming from somewhere within, without — just in the waiting and the patience he was happy. Existence justified itself. This then was the only dignity possible to little man so pitifully aware of littleness . . . this waiting upon the Lord . . . 'Be still and know that I am God . . . Be still . . . Be still . . .'

Dark hours passed on the hilltop with noiseless and beautiful speed. Sleep was a remote disease which did not trouble his detachment. When the clouds had at last furled their dark sails and left naked the beautiful deep air, he began to be aware of dawn. The country grew up to his eyes as though it were lifted from the bottom of the sea . . . small squares of human occupation, sleeping farmhouses and ordered fields, the drowsy rounded tops of groves and woods: fences began to show dividing Mine from Thine, and the dots of cows and horses already raising their noses to smell morning. Brightness stretched palely across the edge of the round earth, as she tilted visibly down in a giddy surrender to the sun. There he was, the once-worshiped, coming up as nobly and without concern as when he was hailed by a thousand submissive voices. 'O blossom of eastern silence wandering upon paths dustless and untainted by the feet of man, bring thou the dawnward way and be our advocate before the speechless God.'

Nicholas with the sun like a warm hand upon his shoulders went down across the rocky open places to the little freckled homely woods become now suddenly the kind abode of gossiping birds.

He came into his room as quietly as might be, but Stephen opened his eyes, lifted his head, and looked him over from scattered hair, shining eyes, to his stained and crumpled trouser-legs and shoes.

Nicholas, under the inspection, laughed at him softly and boldly.

'I'd rather,' Stephen drawled harshly from his pillow, 'I'd a long sight rather you'd come home drunk with liquor . . . than drunk . . . like this. It makes me sick.' He turned over, squaring the shoulder of his scorn.

The sun had reached the window-sill and, as Nicholas pulled down the shade, the bells of the seminary began a loud harsh ringing.

CHAPTER V

RETREAT

THERE was a hack-driver at Kaaterskill Station, as old and as unsightly as the station itself: a fat and wrinkled Jacob Crool with a stubbled chin, a red face, and a wet left eye, who chewed tobacco, spat it dextrously, and squatted near the platform to pounce on the newcomer as yet unfamiliar with the discomforts of his dingy surrey and the slowness of his old gray horse. Little John, nervous and despondent, was an easy victim; his valise was seized by Crool before even he had left the train-step.

'Here y'are, Johnnie. I'm right where 'always wuz . . . always ready 'smy motto. Ain't change' any. Ye're home early, ain't you, from the uneyevs' ty this year. Ain't seen Nicholas yet nor Billy Paxton. Let me take that v'lise offen your hands. Say, you've growed since Christmas. Lands, I do b'lieve you hev growed a foot.'

John admitted that he was home early and that he had grown and tried, as he got into the fringed surrey with its drooping net-protected horse, to put Jake in his place, by an assumption of worldly dignity and the lighting of a cigarette. Jake, having no place to be put into, remained on top and talked over his shoulder as they went jerking up from the river-front across the railway bridge and along the steep cobbled street which formed the spine, afflicted with pronounced curvature, of the hillside town.

'There are more saloons than ever,' John commented involuntarily, struck afresh by the intense ugliness of this dingy and unshaded street.

'There cert'nly are, 'sa caution.' A breath that had liberally sampled the entertainment of several of these saloons was wafted back with the words. 'See our Garage. These here automobiles are comin' s'fast likely me and my hoss'll

be put out of business. Don't see th'smart equipages at the station no more hardly. Mr. Paxton he gets took up in his machine and your Aunt Carrie she's drivin' her own car herself. Looks kinder queer too . . . to see a woman. I seen Angey and her husband run through last week, had a puncher right about here, near to the Corners. See our new Post Office? Lots of improvements. This new Mayor we got now's a hustler . . . There wuz a fire near to the 'pisc'pal church last week.'

'A fire? Any one hurt? Mr. Hunt all right?'

'Oh, say, Mr. Hunt's got run out by your Uncle Martin. Regular full-sized church row. Your Aunt Carrie, I guess, she was at th' bottom of it. Big fuss. Your uncle called him a poodle . . . a dam' sanct'mon'us poodle, at the wardens' meeting. Said he was turnin' Methody and playin' spir'tool tricks to amoose the fact'ry hands. Said as how th' church wasn't fit for the gentry any more, come Sundays, smelt t' Heaven, thas what they say he says.' Crool spat mahogany-colored fluid over his wheel. 'And he says . . . Hunt says . . . that if they turned the working-man out they'd turn Christ out and him. So's I believe, your Uncle Martin says, "Get to hell with th' bunch of you" . . . which they all done and Hunt's opened a kinder chapel down to the Creek . . . tenements . . . nice place to take his daughter to! . . . I'd say if you asked me . . . right on top of Gissing's. Say, your Uncle Martin's sold his old house on Maple Lane . . . Been empty long enough. Wo'st thing for prop'ty.'

'Yes . . . I know, last fall, to a Mr. Fane.'

'Thas him . . . writer. He's done a bad job, too, puttin' up a wall all round 'sgarden so folks can't see in, and poor Mrs. Nobbs next door'd spend half her time enjoyin' that bit of lawn and neighborly doin's. Can't see a thing now . . . 'tain't democracy. They do say he lets 'sdaughter dance on th' turf hot evenin's in'r shimmy and turns hose upon her for coolness . . . or discipline . . . there's two idears of it . . . but some kind of goin's-on is sure to be when a gent puts up a great high wall like that, pays good money to do it . . . He's

got th' house all covered with plaster-like . . . pinkish . . . looks like a piece of cake. Writer, kind of crazy in th' head like a fish . . . um? Got a nice wife, though, neat-lookin' small body, grayish hair . . . no foll-lolls, just plain folks, but she carries a cane . . . kinder mannish . . . They got a young limb ov a boy, in and out of mischief one day's end to 'nother. I'd touch him up if I had the handlin' ovim. Got a lick at him on the tail end of my kerridge last Sat'day. He fingered 'snose at me. I don't mind him s'much nayther . . . boys is boys . . . but he needs a bit of a trimmin'. The darter's a free piece too, laughs and talks with every one, male or female. S'far as looks goes she knocks spots out'f Angey, money or no money . . . I hear tell yer Pa's be'n sick. That bring you home? Had a money loss, they tell me. I c'd give him some inside infra-mation as to that Garvery of his . . . sells 'struck — garden truck — on the side. Mr. Joseph like's not buys back 'sown greens from Manders, fancy price. Got's tongue in's cheek, Manders. 'Shad it in fer yer Pa since the time he made him take back that case of breakfast food with th' worms in't . . .'

'Ye gods!' muttered Johnnie, his lips pale with exasperation.

He cast a look down Maple Lane as he passed the corner and caught sight at its end of the soft-tinted wall and a tempting little timber door beside which a rose tree blossomed. It looked pretty and romantic, like something in a book. He had a queer feeling, intuition he called it, that this Mr. Fane would be a tall thin stooping man with kind incisive eyes. When Little John a few days later met the new owner of his Uncle Martin's outgrown dwelling, he gloried in the rightness of these intuitions, having forgotten an afternoon in March, now many years ago, when he had pulled up his stockings and made a joke about Mrs. Baxter's goat having eaten some of this same gentleman's books.

The paleness of his lips increased as the surrey came in sight of the Homestead gate-posts. He threw away his cigarette and, finding Crool's chatter utterly unbearable as

his suspense grew, he dismissed him at the entrance, pulling out the valise and over-tipping with the munificent cowardice of youth.

'It's not like y'r Pa,' winked Crool, pocketing the coin. 'Likely give him a setback if he c'd see that, Johnnie.'

The drive looked sad and neglected, its borders untrimmed, the windfalls of a summer storm in its unraked ruts: the grave, drooping larches shed a melancholy upon him as he walked. With every step toward the pillared veranda which showed in the sunlight like a golden bar across the end of this dark vista, it seemed to Little John that he left farther behind him the normal eager Princeton existence, the thoughts and feelings of his own kind, the informing genius of his generation. He had steered aside from the main current into this half-stagnant eddy which had held his father's apprehensive spirit so long out of the rushing thoroughfare of life.

But John, for all the melancholy which was his inheritance and, at the same time, the mature translation of those mysterious terrors of his childhood, was, if not glad, at least resigned to his retreat. He belonged here among the sheltering shadows, his sensitive spirit expanded in the half-light, he was eased of the poignancy of his self-distrust, his hatred for conflict and competition, his dread of blunders, failures, and disgrace. By giving up Princeton, he had run away from all his problems, had shut the door on worry and had indefinitely postponed his wrestling match with humanity's arch-foe . . . reality.

Just before he came to the house, he left the larch-tree shadows and in the long veranda, one shallow step above the turf, stood in a blaze of five o'clock sunshine, which warmed the old boards and pillars in their faded coat of blistering buff paint. The top of the Dutch door stood open, showing the black cool cavern of the hall. The house was entirely still: outside somewhere Garvery could be heard scratching with a dilatory rake, beyond the gate Italian children quarreled and teased a puppy into frenzied bark-

ing. John set down his valise, and laid his hand on the lower half of the door.

A high voice unexpectedly, eerily close to him, spoke from inside the house. 'I am a jealous God!' it said coldly.

John's pulses, so sudden and immediate were the words, gave one simultaneous leap, and before he knew any reason for the act or was at all aware of having himself dictated it, he was back in the veranda with his hand on his suitcase. It was not too late to go back, to escape from this . . . this . . . Nobody knew that he was home . . . nobody . . . except Hooker.

Nothing is more certain, of course, than that, his immediate nerve spasm being spent, Little John would never have gone back to Princeton, that the mere physical difficulty of getting himself and his heavy bag down to the station in time to catch the only possible train back, even without considering the risk of chance encounters and miserably difficult explanation, and that final lion in his path, the long explanatory letter to President Wilson . . . would have been more than enough of a deterrent to his hesitant and timid spirit. Nevertheless, he always believed and liked to believe that, if at that moment Garvery had not hailed him loudly from the garden and brought Joseph running to the door, he would have gone back and so have changed, for worse or better, the whole course of his life. As it was, his retreating foot never so much as touched the shallow veranda-step.

'Hi there, Johnnie . . . you back?' This was Garvery, the too-familiar, and with that, out ran Joseph panting and shocked, disaster in his pale eye and on his stammering tongue, to clutch at his son's arm with a 'John . . . JOHN! What brings you home like THIS? You haven't . . . been . . . EXPELLED?'

Hooker's excited voice inside gabbled like a peddler's to the audible accompaniment of rapidly shifting toes and feathers . . .

'Thou shalt have none other gods but me . . . John! JOHN!

Hi there, Johnnie . . . Thou shalt have none other gods but me . . .'

In the study sitting as he used to sit between his father and the window with his back to the latter, in order to 'devil up con-cintration,' John laboriously, painfully, with tongue-trippings and stammerings innumerable, explained himself. He explained himself, that is half-hypocritically, to Joseph's taste. He said nothing of Sue or of Nina Jessup nor of being disgraced in the eyes of the whole university . . . (indeed it was not until a week later, when Joseph's letter of forgiveness was returned to him from Princeton, that he knew and burst into uncharacteristic laughter at the knowledge that the letter to Sue and the visit to the President had never been perpetrated at all!) . . . no, he chose his reason very judiciously, a truth, but not the whole truth. He was 'too much worried over the expense,' he could not 'bear to have his father save and scrimp and go without things,' it was difficult for him, with the temptation to spend on every side, to keep within his allowance, he knew he was weak and foolish, but he'd rather not risk half-ruining his father or hurting him, as he had lately been hurt and disappointed . . .

Joseph was obviously touched, certain little strained lines faded out of his face.

'But what,' he asked with a non-committal sternness, 'what do you propose to do, my son? You can't loaf . . .'

'Oh, no, indeed, Papa. I had an idea . . . I'd like to study law, that is . . . with somebody . . . and perhaps . . . get into an office. I could start from the bottom up' — one of Joseph's phrases — 'Mr. Hands might try me out, mightn't he?'

Joseph's fingers idly turned the great ruler over and over on top of his desk while Little John kept his anxious soft eyes lifted to that gray-whiskered downcast face. His father did look ill and old.

'I'd like to please you, if I can, Papa,' John whispered painfully, the quivery look about the corners of his lips.

'Yes . . . yes, I know. I believe, that is . . . you would,

John. Your intentions have always seemed . . . it's your weakness of will that frightens the soul out of me, fills me with terror for your future. I shall have to think this over, John. Your dear mother . . .' He shaded his eyes with his hand.

'It would mean thousands of dollars,' prompted Johnnie, suddenly breathless with terror at the thought of being sent back to college like a whipped truant, against his will.

Joseph's face grew perceptibly smoother and he let fall his hand.

'A university career is exceedingly expensive. How does your Cousin Stephen Hands manage it, John? He has very little, surely.'

'I don't know, Papa. Nobody knows. Stephen is a kind of perennial mystery. He was a waiter, I think, at some hotel last summer.'

'Oh, no, that wouldn't do at all . . . for you . . . though very creditable of course . . .'

'He's a wizard at cards.'

'Gambling? Tchh! Tchh!'

'And I know he tutors . . . mat . . . mathematics. He looks very smart and he belongs to a good club too. I don't know, honestly, Papa, how he does it. There isn't another fellow in Princeton that can touch Steve . . . I mean he's a grind and yet he's one of the other crowd, whenever he wants to be. He's not exactly popular, but he's . . . well, important . . . if you know what I mean.'

'Naturally, my son,' said Joseph, who did not like this cant phrase. 'I know what you mean. But, it seems, that you are not quite in — Stephen's class . . . isn't that it?'

'I guess it is, Papa. None of the fellows . . .'

'Perhaps a university career is too expensive for my slender means. I must sleep on it, Johnnie. I hate for you to turn back, to take your hand from the plough. But your motive is . . . well, you did right in coming straight to me with your problem.'

'I should be a member of one of the clubs, you see, Papa,

and Nicholas thinks the Triangle Club may want me. All these things are impossible to get out of and they all mean extra expense.'

'Tchk! Tchk!' Joseph tapped the desk with his ruler, then thrust it impatiently aside as though annoyed at the impossibility of using it for a prompt and painful solution of that increasingly difficult problem, John Hands Moore Gregory. 'You will find it very dull here . . . you would have to study hard. We should have to find just the right man. Hands, no doubt, could advise me. Commuting is expensive. It might be possible . . . Philadelphia . . . Aunt Abbey. We'll see. Come here, Johnnie, my dear boy . . . I am glad to have you home.'

He was enormously glad too and relieved that it was a motive of economy rather than of expenditure that had brought Johnnie home. John bent over his father timidly and kissed him. They were both almost happy in the glow of reconciliation in which on both sides there were reserves, misunderstandings, and small mutual deceptions. But they had only each other, after all: both lonely and sensitive men, who found life difficult.

'I'll tell Milly you're here, Johnnie. Have you seen Hooker? He's been off his feed lately. He'll be glad, I dare say, to see you.'

John hid his smile. It was the old admonitory serious tone. It had always been required of him to take an interest in Hooker.

'I'll wash up,' he said and started for the door.

Joseph had already taken out his Journal and Expense Book and was writing neatly, 'Son John just returned unexpectedly from Princeton University. Ticket three dollars and a half, to be taken from his allowance.'

Later that evening John again tried to explain himself. They were in their old places under the lamp, Joseph with his newspaper, which John could never see until it was at least a day old, and John with one of his old leathery magic-makers. As he sat there with his head propped on his hand,

listening to a moth knocking against the lamp-shade and to the grim low tick-tack of the grandfather's clock, he was hard put to it to believe in Princeton at all. Was it only yesterday that he had waited in that clamorous room of Nicholas's . . . the banjo had been plinking, 'My gal's a high-born lady, she's black but not so shady . . .' Amory Gray had looked at him sidelong out of her black eyes.

Reverie brought him to the beginning of his woes.

'What made me get into debt in the first place, Papa —' he began abruptly.

'Please don't discuss it, John. I would rather call the subject closed.'

'But I just want to say one thing, Papa. I would like you to understand. Uncle Martin, you see, gave me a check last year.'

The newspaper rustled warningly, irritably. 'Yes?' . . . very coldly.

'And . . . I mean, you see . . . it was like this . . . I sort of counted on it this year.'

'Ah!' Joseph then became oppressively silent and changed the position of his legs.

'I was sure all the time of getting it again and it would have more than covered that three hundred dollars. But he never sent it to me this year.'

Joseph read down a column, his face hidden from the troubled and apologetic eye of John. The latter dropped at last to the page of 'Vanity Fair' where Sedley calls Becky his little diddle-diddle darling, and he drew a big and boyish sigh.

'Er,' ejaculated his father, crushing down his newspaper sternly across his knee. John looked up, red and startled. Joseph met his eyes with a certain effort.

'Your Uncle Martin sent that check this year to me . . . to use for you as I thought best . . . that is . . . I dare say he fancied I should be wicked enough to forward it to you for such purposes as flowers for young women and . . . er . . . dress-suits at exorbitant prices . . .' Johnnie had an incon-

gruous vision of a wardrobe lined with identical tuxedos . . . 'I saw fit, however, to invest it in your name, John. You have now the beginning of a private fortune . . . a bond, a gilt-edged security, paying a yearly interest of four per cent . . . I want you from time to time to add to it . . . a nest egg . . .'

'When was this, Papa?' John stammered.

'Shortly after the Christmas holidays, my son, at the beginning of your second term.'

John put his hand uncertainly to his mouth which remained rather widely opened for several minutes, as did his eyes.

'It — it was m-more than enough . . .' he stammered eventually.

Joseph became at this white with sudden wrath.

'I did not use it to pay your debts,' he thundered, 'if that is what you are trying to suggest. I had invested it for you. That's all, John. NOT ANOTHER WORD.'

Johnnie fell back in his chair and tried to go on with 'Vanity Fair.' At least, he used it as a shield, further fortified by Joseph's shaking newspaper. The elder Gregory's struggle against his nervous rage was audible for about fifteen minutes in uneven breathing and rapid ill-regulated movements of his hands and legs and body. Johnnie was remembering that horrible scene in his college room, the tragic father, ill with anxiety, tormented by the loss of that three hundred dollars. Gradually, slowly, the two rare, lonely twinkles opened in Johnnie's eyes, but, in spite of this addition, they remained sad and bewildered eyes. He would never understand this Joseph Gregory . . . never . . . never . . .

CHAPTER VI

THE BLUE FLOWERS OF HEAVEN

AT about ten o'clock the next morning, Joseph, on the point of writing a letter to Nathaniel Hands to ask his advice in the matter of John's law studies, discovered that he had lost his glasses. It was 'most annoying,' such a thing had not happened to him before 'in years.' He was always very careful with his belongings, had never had to replace this original pair of lenses for which he had paid an 'exorbitant' price to a New York oculist ten years before. They *must* be found . . . he had been disturbed, excited by John's unexpected arrival and the change of plans.

He went hunting all over the house with that conscientious almost violent thoroughness characteristic of him, while Garvery outside and Milly and John within, went hunting too — John in a sort of guilty flurry as though he were subject to punishment if his effort should be in vain. It was undoubtedly his fault that the spectacles had been mislaid.

He suggested an expedient: 'Why don't you dictate the letter to me, Papa?' but 'No, no,' cried Joseph irritably from the rubber-closet — it was possible that in bending over to put on his galoshes the spectacles had fallen into Johnnie's rubber-boots — 'Quite out of the question. I'll lay my hands on them presently.'

He intended, in that letter to his old friend, Nathaniel Hands, to describe John in unvarnished phrases as biddable and likable enough, but far from brilliant and with a certain deplorable instability of character, inherited from God knew where. It would hardly do to dictate all this to John. He meant, besides, to dwell considerably on his own financial sacrifices and, after that truly heroic admission concerning Martin's check, it might be difficult . . . well, John was

young and given to callow misunderstandings, he might put a tongue in his cheek.

The spectacles must be found, a 'thorough search,' no 'stone left unturned.'

At one o'clock a hasty luncheon rather like the ceremony of Passover was eaten in silence and at half past one the search began immediately again.

But John could not any longer sustain his interest. His effort began to be merely eye-service of the most superficial kind, a flagging gesture. At two-thirty his father and he came together in the study and gave each other blank despairing looks.

'Where were you when you had them last, Papa?' asked Johnnie weakly, pretending that he had been, not reading the newspaper, but looking under it.

Joseph answered angrily. 'If I knew that, John, I should certainly have been able to find them. It seems to me that at your age with your eyesight . . . if I had not been discomposed it would never have hap — There now!' with a sudden change of tone . . . 'I remember. I had them last at Mr. Fane's early this morning when I stopped on my way home from market to ask Mrs. Fane what she was paying Trickett for his fresh eggs. She lent me one of her husband's books. I wish you'd return it, Johnnie, when you go for the spectacles. I have no intention of reading it. It looks worthless . . . fiction . . . all about marriage . . . women . . . sex. There it is on the table. Go right down and take the book. The spectacles were left on the living-room table. The Fanes have thrown in two or three of Martin's downstairs rooms and made one large unlivable apartment which they call the living-room . . . some new-fangled scheme. You may say I have no time for light reading.'

John, though rather shy about introducing himself to the Fanes, was delighted to escape from the house and from his father, and set off in good spirits, the book under his arm, recalling the old timorous excited holiday feeling when, his lessons prepared, he was free to go and play with Hesther

Anne. Poor little Hesther! He must look her up . . . down near Gissing's among the Creek slums . . . what had really happened to Mr. Hunt? Remembering his small grayness, Johnnie found it difficult to believe Crool's story. The man had always been repressed, constrained, orthodox, untroubling.

Before he reached his own gate, John glanced at the book he was carrying and it occurred to him that he might better look it over and have something intelligent and appreciative to say to its distinguished author. He therefore retired to the shelter of a big pine tree near the lane, a familiar retreat, where he now lay on his stomach motionless for two hours, devouring 'Masks' from cover to cover.

It was to Johnnie a terrible book, fascinating, incredible, curiously real . . . a mere thread of a story on which were strung magnificent multi-colored jewels of comment and analysis. Granted the initial premise that such processes were humanly possible, it was a book to stir a youth of John's age to the foundations of his soul. He didn't like it, it frightened him, but, having finished it and stood up, automatically brushing the pine-needles from his suit, he felt that it had changed and influenced his world. If life were really like that . . . an ugly but profound adventure with beauty forever creating itself out of ice and mud to be trampled back again to mud and ice, why then paradoxically it was somehow magnificently worth the living. How did such a book with its incredible revelation of sub-self bring about so hopeful a result? It was a tragedy, a sordid tragedy . . . and yet . . . John remembered a shocking picture of some French statue, a beast with a woman's face, her claws tearing the flesh of a youth who in ecstasy tasted the splendors of her kiss . . . life, the animal, with the face of a goddess, life with a claw and a supreme embrace . . . 'Le Suprême Baiser' . . . that was it. It should have been the title of Fane's book. John went stumbling on down towards the village with a feverishly flushed face and the stare of a sleep-walker.

At the little green timber door in the wall, he found a long chain which he pulled. There came a distant ringing in the house, which brought a man, Italian or French, with high red cheek-bones, rough hair and a quick liquid eye. He said if 'Mistair Gregory would wait in ze garden he would find it pleasen', and went gracefully back along the brick path, gesturing before he left towards a low canvas chair under the apple tree.

It was with the strangest dream-feeling that John obeyed. How well he remembered that apple tree, every branch and twig and leaf of it . . . and his own fear of climbing, and Nicholas's legs always about twenty feet higher than his own most daring highest. But the rest of the garden, all around the apple tree, was entirely changed. It had been, in Martin's day, a littered mangy back yard, with clothes drying . . . poor tiny Ruth's little woolen shirts . . . a few chickens, a row or two of vegetables. It had been the children's playground and the servants' summer reception-room. Now, there was the yellowish wall already a clinging place for vines, the pinkish house with its cheerful French windows opening to the ground, a square of turf greener than emeralds, while for three feet or so along the walls on all of its angles and against the house, there were flowers: ranks of flowers, and all blue . . . larkspur, bluettes, monkshood, and flax, high and low, slender as spears, narrow as flames, round as coins. John had never dreamed of so many different shades of azure. With the golden wall and the rosy house, the green turf and the summer sky, these delicate breathing winged ornaments made a symphony of color almost audible, notes rising and falling with the flight of luminous butterflies and heavy bees. John sprawled his slim length in the canvas chair and rested back his head. This place was reverie made tangible, visible, and fragrant. It was . . . June.

Opposite the little timber door which had admitted him, there was a more informal gate, of white wooden lattices . . . it swung open with a creak and a click and a girl came to-

wards him down a narrow path among all the blueness of the flowers. She saw him in an instant and was evidently confused, probably because of the disorder of her hair, which she must have been drying in the sun, for it stood out around her neck and shoulders in a dense fair mist. She wore sheer white, a dress open at the throat and straight, entirely out of style, which at the moment was belted, high-collared and Gibsonesque. She had put out her hands a little to keep her hair spread to the sun and this sudden discovery of a strange young man seated in the garden kept them there, opened her blue eyes very wide, and colored her face. There was a startled look which seemed, because of the absence of any other expression, a little unearthly and ecstatic.

John had that sensation of having sat there before, his eyes lifted to watch her move swiftly forward amongst the orderly blue flowers. She seemed his guest, a 'revenant,' an answer, something he had been waiting for. He never recognized her resemblance to the angel of the stained-glass window sacred to the memory of Sarah Hands, because, after all, she was so different, so real and close and young, but in the days when he had wondered what it would be like to have that onrushing angel-mother with the bright hair and pale hands, at breakfast or in the nursery, he had been conscious of this half-chill, half-rapturous desire.

He rose, but the girl deflected suddenly with a shy smile before she was within greeting distance and ran into one of the French windows, her hands gathering up her hair. She was the Fane girl, of course, the girl who danced 'in'r shimmy,' hot evenings. How vulgar was the tongue of town talk with its coarse interpretations of freedom and privacy and loveliness. The girl was as lovely as the garden . . . June, blue and gold and rose.

In another instant she was out again with her hair in a huge knot, all drawn up from her very slim neck and pink ears, coming straight to him this time with her right hand extended.

'I know who you are,' she said, as he rose again and bowed

and took her hand, thin and warm with sun, 'you've come for your father's spectacles. I have them for you here . . . But please wait. Father wants to see you. And mother. We've ordered some raspberry vinegar and cake. Mother makes the raspberry vinegar and it's awfully good on a hot afternoon. We always have it at five o'clock. Pepper will be here any minute. We know an unfair lot about you . . . all of you Gregorys. You're the one they call Little John, aren't you? Was it because you were tall for your age?' She had waited between each of these sentences for John to say something, but, as he had never got beyond 'Er, er,' she had gone on, a little shy herself, perhaps, in a brave fashion, but emboldened by his far greater shyness. This time she waited longer.

'Er . . . er . . . no. Because I was just — little. I don't know when or why they — I mean — I don't know why they began calling me that.'

'And Nicholas is your first cousin, isn't he? They talk most about him because he lives in such magnificence and has his own car. They think you are — sort of — exclusive.'

John flushed sensitively, and she, seated now in a smaller chair with its back tilted against the apple tree, saw the flush and the look on his mouth and went on quickly. 'I only told you that because I thought you might like it. Lots of people like to be thought exclusive. But I see you don't. I'm glad you're not like that. Hesther Anne said you wouldn't be. I didn't believe her . . . because she's so good.'

This seemed a queer reason for disbelief, but John understood her meaning. Hesther Anne was literally sometimes too good to be true.

'Do you know Hesther Anne? I mean . . . of course you do . . . but . . . ?'

'Awfully well. I've been here six months. I've seen a lot of her. She has a perfectly dreadful father.'

'Why?' John stammered. He thought her far too frank and critical, and she knew instantly that he thought so and

didn't like him to think so and was worried, but helpless. It made her worse.

'Perfectly horrid little man . . . so *gnashing*.'

John for the first time realized that in his small gray face, Mr. Hunt had enormous teeth, but he said coldly, 'Gnashing?'

'Spiritually, I mean . . . red-hot and serious, passionate about God. He acts as if he was in love with Him.' She gave Johnnie at this a half-scared, half-wicked look out of her eye-corners and he saw then that her face was not a good face at all . . . not, that is, the face of a conspicuously good young girl. It was a sly sidelong face with a jaw running out, a flexible long mouth, a queer soft round-tipped nose, not straight, and the eyes, no longer widened, were very unusually narrow and close to their long fine brows. She looked at him in this sidelong fashion and drew down the corners of her mouth oddly when she smiled. It was a pagan face, pagan, not classic, beautifully shaped, justly proportioned, well poised on a long and lovely throat, but it was subtly irregular and daring, the sort of little face that the most archaic of Hellenic shepherds fancied he saw in a tree-trunk or between flying sprays. An artist, weary of ideal feminine beauty, would gladly imagine such a face. It was heathen and unnaturally glad, with a tongue for bidden or forbidden sweets, an eye for quests both holy and unholy. She could be ruthless, dangerous: there was more than a little of the Bacchante in her expression. Her fairness and her youth and her white gown were all that was angelic; the rest, golden skin, rippling features, and the spirit of her, were earthly and untamed. She was not in the least like Hesther Anne and not like Susan Jay . . . less like Susan Jay than like Hesther Anne . . . her badness being queerly spiritual.

That speech of hers as to Mr. Hunt's acting as if he were in love with God, shocked John profoundly. He had always been fond of Mr. Hunt and he was besides naturally pious and devout. Again she knew that he disapproved of her and she was ready to cry, for it was quite evident that she liked

John a great deal at this first meeting, his air of breeding and of gentleness, his warm and dusky color, and his eyes. She plunged on, however, in her desperate gay fashion, shocking him more completely.

'You ought to take God with a grain of salt, I think . . . Oh, here's father and mother and the raspberry vinegar.' She looked vividly flushed and her pupils were dark with a queer mixture of distress and laughter. 'I'm afraid you don't like father's book, but please say something nice about it because he's very sensitive and mother would boil you in oil . . . gladly . . . cheerfully . . .'

This, *sotto voce*, was a ferocious introduction for the woman who immediately thereafter greeted Little John.

Mrs. Fane looked small beside her tall lean husband, but, by making the most of straight lines and a little head, she contrived to look tall when she was away from him. Unlike her daughter's her face was emphatically that of a good woman, thoroughly and completely good, saturated with goodness, patience, kindness, wisdom, and a willingness to be pleasant and amused . . . a face neither ugly as her daughter's could be nor beautiful as her daughter's somehow was — a much more correct set of features, small twin eyes prettily set, so bright that the color was invisible, wrinkles about them and about her too-determined mouth, some bitterness in her expression, a hint of disappointment overcome, of anger softened and of pride controlled. She had a low even voice, rather too determined, perhaps, like her mouth.

Fane took the trouble to be polite to his young visitor, though he was obviously tired to the point of exhaustion, and collapsed into Johnnie's chair like a complicated sort of foot-rule gone to pieces. He seemed yards long and terribly lean, and his face was battered and lined. His eyes, while they smiled in the kindest and sweetest fashion, seemed to be able to gather in all sorts of information about Johnnie, seeing into him, through him, round him, so that John was suddenly convinced of the actuality of auras and knew that he had one himself, since Mr. Fane was looking at it. The

man was evidently tired out, very clever, and very ready to be kind. John immediately worshiped him.

'I've just read your book, sir. I'm c-crazy about it. I . . . I d-don't understand it all, but I think it's great . . . I mean . . . you won't care, of course, for my opinion.'

'But of course I do. I care enormously. I hoped you'd like it . . . What didn't you understand?'

Several hours after that question, John left the golden and rosy garden with a sensation in his head of blowing trumpets and of sounding bells. It had been a tremendous experience. He had actually talked, expressed himself, found and articulated real opinions, used similes, gesticulated, lifted his voice, laughed at his own flights of oratory. These remarkable people had listened to him as though what he thought and felt were of some importance, they had questioned him, forced him to say why and how and when. They had so obviously expected him to have ideas that he had been forced to produce ideas. Was it possible that, after all, he really had something like . . . wit . . . ability?

They had argued for and against his theory . . . it seemed he had given voice to something like a theory . . . Mrs. Fane on his side, Fane considerately but vehemently against him, and Lydia, her slender thrusting chin in her hand, slid her eyes from her father's face to his in a liquid vivid fashion which acted upon him like applause. She laughed at some of his comparisons and her laughter seemed to get into his blood like sunlight into wine.

After sunset when the garden was nearly dark, Pepper arrived, fortunately, perhaps, because Little John had forgotten all about such a thing as taking leave . . . a most amusing creature, Pepper, with the brown face of a faun, fifteen years old, perhaps, a clever mischievous-looking youngster doted on by his family and as restless as a monkey. He looked, perhaps, more like a monkey than a faun with the small quick black eyes, the dark small wrinkly face, white teeth, and a smile almost infantile in its absurd attractiveness.

Little John was inclined to agree with Crool that Pepper needed 'trimmin' ' . . . certainly boarding-school would be a good thing for him. In fact, John thought both the young Fanes spoiled and impertinent. Lydia's speeches to him, that one about 'taking God with a grain of salt,' had been quite impossible, irreverent, flippant, in bad taste. She filled him for the first time in his life with the masculine passion for reform. He'd like, without changing her outwardly at all — for somehow he did like her looks — to make her inwardly more like . . . He was on the edge of sleep after half a night's excited wakefulness when he reached this point in his comments on the Fane family and he couldn't rouse himself to think to what resemblance he wanted to force Lydia, but, in his dreams, instantly she became this some one, walking amongst blue flowers with naked silver feet.

CHAPTER VII

HESTHER ANNE

WHEN Hesther Anne's father called to her, from dining-room to kitchen, the news of Little John's return to Kaaterskill, she dropped the plate she was washing and burst into tears. They were silent tears, she would not for the world have had her father witness them, and she stood like a child with her bare arm crooked across her face while she was shedding them. The thought that she might soon see Johnnie provided her with a sort of touchstone for the realization of these queer and terrifying changes in her life.

The kitchen of their new home was a tiny dreary room with a cracked plaster wall, a damaged stove, and a meager supply of nicked and broken vessels. Hesther labored in it against all manner of irritating odds: a leaking spigot, a choked pipe, a broken grate which let the coal slip out with the ashes, an insufficient supply of hot water, a splintered grease-saturated floor; while through the windows blew the breath of poverty, the noise of overcrowding, of women with too many children, and of children with too few mothers to the dozen of them. The rest of the narrow house was no better than the kitchen. Hesther had tried to make it neat and fresh, but the cracked plaster, the oilcloth floor-covering, the cheap varnished furniture, the flies against which there were no screens, and which droned in and out in sticky swarms, made her efforts a mockery, the merest gesture of desperate femininity. She came to be thankful that she had managed to rid the upper story of its vermin. There was, besides, a more profound and spiritual discouragement, her father seemed to glory in the ugliness, the sordid lack of comfort and of taste, seemed almost to resent her efforts at amelioration.

Perhaps after all, thought Hesther, drying her eyes and

picking up the pieces of the broken plate, it would be better if Little John did not come to see her. Perhaps he wouldn't even care to come because of her father's terrible quarrel with Martin Gregory.

At this time, if it had not been for a beloved Comforter, Hesther Anne would have been comfortless indeed. She had a good many just causes for unhappiness, more than a good girl of eighteen summers, an age when we are usually driven to inventing our unhappiness, really ought to have had. In the first place, she loved her father, and he was changed, enchanted, like a man who has ridden with the witches on Walpurgis Night. He had always been a tense and nervous little man, but under his wife's touch and under the pressure of his first grief he had been silent, dignified. Now, he was always vociferous, hoarse with self-expression, capable of passionate white rages, of audible sudden prayers . . . of tears. He was a voice crying in season and out of season, on his Lord. Hesther obediently, for he was not only her father but her priest, was trying to make over, in the image now presented to her, the God Who had been her Heavenly Father, her merciful Judge, some one brooding, tender, with the stability of the Rock of Ages and with the sheltering regal grace best described in the hymn she murmured just before she slept . . . 'Keep me, oh, keep me, King of kings, under the shadow of Thy wings.' Her father had rudely disturbed the tranquil vision. His raucous, energetic, shouting God, insistent for salvation, crying out terribly against this human frailty or that, thundering of brimstone and fiery lakes, of crowns and martyrdoms and Precious Blood . . . Blood! — was a god with much resemblance to a demon. Hunt's unceremonious ceremonies, the chants, the plumping down on his knees with a blind shouting of sudden extemporaneous prayer, seemed to quiet-eyed Hesther very like the rites of demon-worship. She tried not to think so, she banished the unwilling simile, she prayed silently in her closet not to entertain such thoughts.

But, for her comfort, though she was trying to make over

God the Father in Hunt's freshly discovered image of Him, she jealously guarded her vision of His beloved Son. The secret places of Hesther's heart were unchangingly possessed by two companions: both in the likeness of young men. One wore an Eastern robe, walked on dusty sandaled feet, had hands dark and eloquent: and was full of quaint and startling speeches, homely, unforgettable as the bread of daily life. He said, 'Man is better than a sheep.' He said, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a leaven which a woman took and hid in a measure of meal.' He said with that shrewd and laughing tongue of his, 'John the Baptist came unto you neither eating nor drinking wine, and ye said, "He hath a devil." The Son of Man is come eating and drinking and ye say, "Behold a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners."' In such words, it would seem, He was actually described by His contemporaries . . . this friendly, eager and active young Man, who walked so far and talked so much, trying to tell people what was in His mind.

Close to Him, in a lower but warmer chamber of Hesther's heart, there was the vision of another young man for whom she prayed and over whom she wept, because, forsooth, he thought so little of her when he was away and at such times as, rarely, he was with her, he would be laughing while she was serious, deeply shaken by the gravity of a girl's love. This one had yellow hair and shining eyes, and of him, too, they said, 'Behold a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.' . . . Nicholas, Nicholas, Nicholas . . . a name like the ringing of an anvil, with whose father her father had quarreled terribly and whom he now reviled, naming him in Biblical epithet to his workmen, an oppressor, a Pharaoh, a grinder of the faces of the poor. If only Pharaoh had been somebody else's father.

Little John came to see Hesther the second day after his return. He wanted to go to see the Fanes again, but decided that this would be rather 'rushing it,' so converted his craving for talk and Lydia's eyes into a desire for the

companionship of Hesther. He was half afraid of seeing her since his father had more than confirmed Crool's story of the 'reg'lar full-sized church row.'

'It was,' Joseph had said, 'it seemed to me . . . that is, most indecorous. Martin was partly to blame . . . that is . . . he was violent and, in many respects, unjust. But Hunt had been very slack . . . oh, yes . . . I always considered him a poor business man, I could never see where the parish money went . . . the accounts were badly kept. But I cannot altogether sympathize with Martin's stand. Of course, there was some reason to it. Some of the better factory hands had been coming to Saint Matthew's Church, a foreman and his wife, very decent sort of people indeed. Later a group of people . . . some sort of Brotherhood, perhaps . . . rather of the Revivalist type . . . quite out of place in an Episcopal church . . . Hunt fell immediately under their influence . . . but he had been getting more and more non-sectarian, developing — er — you might say, a sort of violence . . . bad taste, not what we were accustomed to. It ended in attracting riff-raff . . . dreadful-looking people . . . not clean. At the communion service I found myself at the elbow of a woman . . . well, not at all the sort of person one expects to see communicating. It is quite true that the church smelled of these people. Some of our mothers objected because of contagious disease . . . most unhealthy-looking specimens, many of them . . . tubercular, a certain type of English near-consumptive. Martin protested at one of the meetings. I myself was ready to put the matter to Hunt in a more conciliatory fashion, but you know your Uncle Martin. He takes the reins into his own hand. Your grandfather, my poor father, used to say it would be the ruin of him. He is my junior, of course, both in years and as church warden, but he's hot, very hot and rash . . . I fear that one day he will dissipate his fortune . . . I fear it . . .' The rest was pure, half-wishful apprehension until, by Johnnie's patient questions, Joseph was drawn back to Hunt and Hesther Anne.

'I don't quite know how they will make out. He can have very slender means . . . quite insufficient. His idea is, I believe, a non-sectarian movement, a revival . . . something quite of his own inspiration . . . starting down there in the Creek slums where Kaaterskill, quite at its worst, touches Gissing's. That was always a wretched little place . . . Gissing's. There used to be a disreputable dancing-hall . . .'

'But . . . Hesther Anne?' Johnnie prompted huskily, seeing his little friend with her hair pushed back from those attentive black-lashed eyes.

'Yes . . . yes . . . most regrettable. A sweet girl . . . pretty . . . very nice, deeply regretted by every one in the parish. Poor little woman! Tchh! Tchh!'

Joseph had evidently no slightest expectation of ever seeing Hesther Anne again. She might have gone to the moon. So John said nothing of his present intention, both because he was naturally uncommunicative and because he had besides an instinct for avoiding controversy. He just slipped off in the drowsy part of the afternoon. He knew vaguely how to get to the Creek slums . . . an unattractive walk enough and a long one for a hot June day.

Down from the ridge along which Main Street had been built, out past the more decent little factory homes, beyond the coal-yard and the town dump-heap where all the tin cans in the world seemed to have found a final resting-place, down a steep cindery path to that huddle of irregular blackish roofs went John until at the lowest level, along the desecrated border of the muddy Creek, he found himself in an alleyway where some dirty-nosed and inimical children directed him to the door of the Preacher's house. The door was locked and no one came to his rapping.

'Preacher's round to the Room,' said the children after they had enjoyed for a season John's useless activity, so to 'The Room,' around the alley's corner, John went, attracted physically, though mentally repelled by a tremendous shouting. 'The Room' was ordinarily a billiard or pool hall, some sort of recreation center, he imagined, but as he now

saw through the open door and windows, it had been converted for Sunday use into a chapel or a meeting-house. There were chairs and benches, closely packed, and above them a platform, across which ranged a fiery and gesticulating figure, in whom John had difficulty in recognizing Julius, in a sack suit with a handkerchief for collar.

'How would you feel, folks,' he was crying in a voice out of all proportion to his size and to the smallness of the room, 'if the earth now . . . here . . . this floor under your feet, was split open so that you looked right down into a fiery bottomless pit? Think of it . . . bottomless. Wouldn't you want to yell and run? Wouldn't you be scared out of your wits? Wouldn't you be shrieking and catching up your kids and calling out for help? And who would you be calling to, I'd like to know? To me? To one another? Not a bit of it. You'd be calling to God. "O God," you'd be yelling, "save us! God! God! Save us . . . Help us . . . O God!"' There was something terribly convincing in this cry as it tore its way from Hunt's throat. In spite of himself and his strongly rooted prejudice against such exhibitions, John felt his flesh creep and his pulse quicken. The man was a magnificent little actor. A girl of thirteen began to cry hysterically. Some one got up softly and went over to her and John saw with a start that it was Hesther Anne . . . Hesther Anne in a shabby blue gown all out of style, last summer's certainly, with a face chiseled away from her ink-rimmed eyes. How she must hate this sort of ranting, this threatening, this reducing of a child to tears!

John came in softly and sat down near the door. No one, not even his nearest neighbors, turned an eye in his direction. They were all, with their mouths agape, looking down into a bottomless pit, their lips moving in unison with Hunt's . . . 'O God! God!' they were saying noiselessly, 'save us! Save us, for Christ's sake!'

The room was hot enough without any vision of a fiery pit, hot and heavy with the concentrated smell which in a mitigated form had so offended the nostrils of Saint Mat-

'thew's parish. Strong-smelling sweat stood out on the faces of Hunt's listeners, beaded their lips and wet their clothing.

'Will He listen to you then?' shrieked Julius. 'Put yourselves in His place. Say you had a bunch of useless, willful, disobedient, grown-up children, every last one of them had jeered at you and mocked you and had told you . . . "Get to hell, you old fool," when you'd been trying to warn them. Say you'd gone to them with tears on your face, with your arms open . . .' Julius came to the edge of his platform and the raucous voice softened into something deeply tender, a calling of the shepherd to his sheep . . . He held out his quivering hands. 'Suppose you'd suffered real agony . . . like, let's say, the pain of nails in your hands . . .' his fingers writhed, he looked down at his palms as though he saw horrible wounds . . . half his audience moved their fingers too in agony . . . 'And through your feet, thorns on your head, a spear . . . O God! a spear-head in your side . . . just to make them see your love and your willingness to forgive them. Suppose they'd spit in your face'—he shrank back passing his hand over his wincing cheek—'spit and mocked you . . . and then gone back to their dirty bloody cursing ways . . . committing adultery . . . and murder . . .' Again his voice was ripping the hot air.

Here Hesther Anne looked over her shoulder—she had succeeded in quieting the hysterical girl—and saw Little John. She stood up impulsively. He too rose and in a moment they were standing together outside of 'The Room.'

They went a few paces down the street to a spot where Hunt's screaming voice was less prohibitive of thought and there John put his arm across her shoulders and gave her a shy, close, rather emotional hug.

'Hesther Anne . . . I'm glad to see you. Don't cry here on the street. Where can we go?'

'Home,' said Hesther with an indescribable laugh.

Her face was trembling like its reflection in a shaken pool. 'Oh, Johnnie, I thought you wouldn't come.'

'Goose! . . . I never saw so many dogs and children in my life.'

'Yes.' She repressed any other comment. . . . 'We can be alone for a few minutes at our house, but after the preaching it will be full of people. They come in to see father and I give them tea and bread. Can you stay until afterwards? You needn't meet any of them. I want so dreadfully to talk to you, Johnnie. I — I'm homesick, I guess . . . sort of . . . that's what's the matter with me.'

'Have you been really sick, Hesther? There's nothing left of you.'

She pushed back her hair with the old gesture, the better to see him and to listen to him. 'Oh, no, I'm never sick . . . just worried about everything. Of course you know what's happened to us.'

'Yes.'

'But you can't know our side of it. Father is doing a wonderful work down here.'

With those sternly loyal eyes of hers upon him it was impossible for Johnnie to say anything but 'Of course he is.'

'It wasn't Mr. Gregory or the others that drove him out, as they're all saying. It was father's own choice. He would not have people turned away because they were poor and ignorant and not . . . quite clean.'

'Of course. I do understand what he must have felt. But, Hesther, it doesn't seem like him . . . that is . . . I mean . . . this sort of preaching . . . Salvation Army business.'

'It came to him gradually, Johnnie. I saw it coming. He would pray aloud at night. It's really quite sincere and natural. He feels that way. He has a gift for it. You heard.' Johnnie nodded truthfully enough. 'It's the only way, besides, to move such people, to rouse them. They're so dull and sort of . . . beaten by their lives, especially the women. I am having an interesting life now. You wouldn't believe it. It's so real. And I'm getting to know these people. I . . . Here's our house, Johnnie, not very nice, is it? But father wants to live like the others. It wouldn't do to put on airs,

would it? . . . even if we could afford to.' Hesther laughed at her own transparent little sophistry and, laughing, looked so much more like her old self that Johnnie was reassured and managed to dismiss the social awkwardness of finding her in such an abominable hole. The kitchen where she took him was really better than the 'parlor.'

'This is where I live,' she said. 'I'm cook and waitress and chambermaid and laundress and I "come in to clean by the day." Will you put some coal on that pesky stove? I'll make you some toast, if I can, buttery, the way you like it. And I believe there's some of my old strawberry preserve somewhere . . . the rectory strawberries. Oh, Johnnie, how delicious they were! I suppose that nasty Englishman is eating them now. I'm perfectly uncharitable when it comes to thinking about the rectory . . . and my own little room with the view of the river and the sun going down.'

'And your Judgment Day Book on the window-sill. Do you remember how you cried when Nicholas read it? Do you still keep it, Hesther?'

'Not I,' said Hesther and gave her mouth a wry and mocking twist. At this new tone of hers Johnnie fell suddenly silent.

'Aren't you home early from college?' she asked when the toast was made and they were eating pleasantly enough at the kitchen table.

Little John began to tell her of his plans.

'Not to go back to Princeton?' Hesther Anne had to hold her hair very tightly away from her ears to take this in. 'What did Nicholas say?'

Johnnie thought it was strange that she should ask him that, and not, 'What did your father say?' It bothered him and annoyed him not a little. What business was it of Nicholas's after all? and why should Hesther imagine that it was? Little John was meek enough and lowly of spirit, but something new had entered into him since yesterday and he was not at all inclined to have Nicholas or any other fellow set up over him. But he was far too gentle and compassionate

to show his annoyance now. He just brushed her question aside and went on with the sober and mature reasons for his step. Of course he said nothing of Nina or of Susan Jay, in fact, the names of these two beautiful and noble women must now drop from our chronicle. Nicholas had been skillful in his application of First Aid and other agencies were now at work. 'Turn giddy and be helped by backward turning,' 'One fire burns out another's anguish' . . . Not that Little John suspected himself of being giddy or of reversing a turning process, nor of suffering from any fire at all . . . unless it might be the cooling embers of his 'callow passion' — the phrase is Johnnie's own, so no apology is necessary — for Susan Jay.

Hesther's gray-brown speckled eyes, so widely opened while she listened, took note of the changes in him, the physical development and the slight touch of masculine assertiveness, and she approved of both. She even fancied that he had grown to resemble ever so little his Cousin Nicholas. She liked to fancy this since it seemed to bring Nicholas nearer. At least, John was a Gregory, one of her dear Gregory boys, whom she used to watch across the aisle of Saint Matthew's and wish they were her brothers and that she herself was as pretty and nicely dressed as Angela. It was all so sweet and so long and long ago. She was getting old much faster than the others, somehow, feeling old. How queer it seemed! They were still getting ready for life, these boys, being educated, while she was certainly well out in the rough salt waters of living.

'You had a bad time making up your mind to do it, didn't you, Johnnie?' she asked with one of her dear smiles, whereupon Johnnie felt sorry for himself and gave her a look of troubled reminiscence.

'It was — rather rotten,' he admitted with manly terseness. How sympathetic and tender Hesther Anne could be! He had half forgotten. 'You didn't come up to Nicholas's graduation . . .' he began and was mercifully interrupted — for her face had turned a deep unhappy pink — by the

singing progress of Hunt and some of his most deeply stirred followers, along the alley to his door. They marched with their eyes lifted shouting:

‘Salvation, oh, salvation,
We are washed in blood . . .
Delivered from damnation
By that blessed flood . . .’

Hunt had evidently saved them temporarily from that fiery bottomless pit.

‘Heavens!’ Johnnie half rose, ‘will they come in here? Hesther, let me come another day . . . any day this week. I can’t face them, really . . . nor your father . . . with all those people with him in that state. Honestly. I’ll be back . . . to-morrow or next day. It’s been great seeing you. There’s a back door, isn’t there? The jam was luscious. I want to see a lot of you. Good-bye. Thank you . . . so much . . . I mean . . .’

‘We are washed in blood . . .
Delivered from damnation
By that blessed flood . . .’

They were actually inside the house.

Johnnie fled by a street as narrow as a drain and got himself out of the sound of those delirious voices. Hesther Anne on the kitchen threshold watched him go, half laughing at his panic, half hurt by his abrupt decision. But she understood, patiently, completely.

Nothing, thought Johnnie, getting back his breath and recognizing his cowardice in the better air of the ridge road, nothing could spoil Hesther, nor embitter her, nor twist her loveliness. What a lucky man would some time snatch her out of this! Nor would he ever want to change her in the least degree, within or without. She was perfect just as she was, dear and pretty, friendly and amusing, gay and as brave as a little lion. No man was good enough for her . . .

For so do young men, and old, think about the woman some other man ought to love and cherish, so and not other-

wise. But not so and quite otherwise do they think about that maddening, altogether unsatisfactory female creature with whom they are themselves in love. Her they want to bully and to kiss, to cause to weep and to be comforted, her they long to protect from a rough world and also from any tenderness except their own. They want to reform her and to shake her, to overcome her — well, it is an entirely different feeling and not, when you come to think frankly about it, altogether . . . respectable.

CHAPTER VIII

A PRISON DOOR

THERE was nothing which so ministered to Caroline Gregory's pride and happiness as a visit from her daughter Angela. If Angela's affection for her mother had always, as it were, a tongue in its cheek, Caroline's for her was completely without such cynical reservations. Angela was everything she had been designed by Caroline to be, she justified every expense, she confirmed every prophecy and flattered a maternal egotism.

'My daughter . . . my daughter . . . mine,' Caroline would be saying over and over to herself as she contemplated with a sort of greed that slimly gowned long-waisted figure with its elaborately waved and pompadoured black hair, its pink-nailed fingers, its beautifully shod and narrow feet, the long points just showing under the ruffles of her sweeping taffeta dress. Angela's cool and drawling voice was purest music to the ears of Caroline. The child was so 'smart,' she knew just how to wear her clothes, she had always the latest thing in jewelry, in handkerchiefs and gloves and purses. She gave her mother the best possible advice and the most careful guidance in such matters and had her up to New York and took her to the stores and the theaters and to hotel tea-rooms where there was music and a crowd . . . the kind of music and the kind of crowd that Caroline adored.

But when Angela came to Kaaterskill it was even nicer, for the two would sit in Caroline's upstairs sitting-room with its sunny bay-window, its sewing-table, where no one ever sewed, its lounge, where no one ever lounged, its stacks of magazines and books, which no one ever read, and here, Angela gracefully posed, Caroline bolt-upright with her eyes of a Christmas doll, they would settle the affairs of the

Nation, of New York society, of Kaaterskill and of the House of Grgeory. But no matter where they began, after an hour or two of gossip, judgment, and self-glorification, they always came back to that problem nearest to their pride and their anxiety . . . to Nicholas.

It is astonishing to think how much they found to say about him. He would have been especially amazed. They knew things he had done which he himself had altogether forgotten, relegated to the limbo of insignificance. They knew what people he 'ran with,' Ripley had seen him at that restaurant or this. They knew that Mrs. Johnny Pierpont-Mount was after him, had captured him, perhaps, that he had had an offer from a New York producer of light opera to sing and dance, that the leading lady of this same producer's latest success wanted Nicholas for her leading juvenile. Ripley had seen him 'very drunk.' Ripley knew the name of that chorus girl with whom Nicholas had supped after a show and held the room spellbound by singing during supper.

'I'll be glad when he gets settled down with Father at the factory,' sighed Caroline, the ladder between her brows.

Angela examined her finger-tips and raised her penciled eyebrows. It was before the days of plucking, but without it Angela managed her eyebrows very well indeed.

'Do you suppose he will settle down, Mother? He hasn't a grain of ambition. He never called on any of the really important people I introduced him to . . . friends of Ripley's . . . useful acquaintances for a business man. And, even at Princeton I heard that he declined a garden-party at the Harry Cranes' . . . this is straight goods, Mother — I had it from Lotta Crane herself — because he had promised to take *their* gardener's son to a show in Trenton . . .'

'Oh, Angela . . . no . . . I can't believe that.'

'Well, I can. It sounds to me exactly like Nicholas. He is working his way — the gardener's son — through Princeton. Nicholas wouldn't even know that he was behaving like a boor or a freak.'

'He's not a boor,' said Caroline rather sharply, considering that she spoke to Angela.

'Freak, then . . . leave it at that.'

'No. Nicholas is not a freak.' It had been her lifelong dread and, recognizing it on this worldly woman's tongue, Caroline winced sharply.

'He'll come out all right. You'll see. Your father was wild too when he was a young man.'

'If it was just wildness! But Nicholas has no taste, no sense of what is done and what can't be done. He goes with the queerest people. I tell you what, Mother, you'd better let me send you out an attractive girl or so to keep Nicholas in bounds this summer. He'll be all over the place, otherwise. Best thing he could do is to get properly married before it's too late.'

'Yes. Yes. I think it would. Who . . . ?'

'If we don't fix it up for him he'll as likely as not get tied up to something . . . well, like Hesther Anne Hunt, especially when he hears about the row.'

'Angela . . . my *dear*.'

'Well, my *dear*, that would be pre-cisely like him. He's perverse. Don't you remember how he would take Mrs. Glenn out buggy-driving when no decent citizen was calling on her? And he was only sixteen. I'll never forget how you fell upon him and tore him limb from limb. And he just — smiled . . . that maddening smile. Didn't say a word. You cried, Mummy . . . you know you did. If one could just slap Nicholas. He needs it.'

'Yes. I think he does. But Father will never take him in hand. The factory . . .'

'Y-yes, perhaps, that'll be a sort of discipline for him, if he really goes into it at all.'

'But, my *dear*, of course he will. What are you thinking of? Father has just brought him up for that, he's been fairly champing at the bit waiting for Nicholas to get through college. Nicholas knows that. If I thought he could ever be so wickedly ungrateful . . .'

'Nicholas doesn't know the first letter of gratitude, Mother. A man . . . or a woman either, for that matter, could let herself be cut into little bits for Nicholas and he wouldn't even know that she was doing it. And as for poor father, Nicholas is about as aware of him and his ambitions and his feelings as he is . . . of the Mikado's. What could you do . . . what could either of you do . . . if he refused?'

Caroline's small face had lost all its brightness. She even bent a little as she sat with her dark-veined ringed hands clutched rigidly on the arms of her chair. There were deep sharp lines in her forehead and around her mouth and the gray in her tawny hair seemed to become more visible as the color left her face.

'We could stop his allowance, I suppose. We could forbid him to come here . . .'

'As if you would, Mother! Nicholas . . . the joy of your heart and the apple of your eye.'

'I could do it if I thought it would be good for him, Angey, if I thought it would bring him to his senses.'

Angela's black and witch-like eyes sparkled. 'I wonder. It would be amusing to see Nicholas on one of the Park benches, eh, Mother?'

Caroline winced.

'I dare say he'd quite like it there. He has a taste for low associates. He'd certainly find 'em. Oh, come, Mother, cheer up. It's not going to happen, you know! Master Nicholas would come round like a shot if he saw the materials for Wine, Woman, and Song vanishing. Why, he lives for a good time. He's the Little Friend of All the World. He'll fall in between the shafts and let Father check-rein him, all right, all right. Do him good . . . make a man of him, I shouldn't wonder. And I'll provide the wife. I've got her in my mind's eye . . . pretty, rich, sensible . . . she'd better be a year or two older than Nicholas, be able to handle him better. But don't enlarge to him on the subject of "our poor little Hesther Anne," Mother . . . promise me.'

Caroline promised bleakly. She had begun almost to dread Nicholas's homecoming.

To tell the truth, Martin in his office at the factory had begun almost to dread it, too. Nicholas's growth and education had seemed to Martin, while it was going on, an interminable process. He had looked despairingly at the slim little boy with his ruffled silky hair and had groaned to himself over the slowness of his development . . . only seven, and the rubber factory about to be realized, only ten and the rubber factory making its start, only fourteen and the rubber factory in full blast, only sixteen and the business crying for a junior partner, so much to manage, so many irons in the fire, Martin overwhelmed with work . . . eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one . . . Here he was, suddenly grown up, and at once the process seemed the work of an instant, the merest twinkling of an eye. Nicholas had been a round-faced baby yesterday, to-day he was that mysterious, guarded, unaccountable thing . . . a man. He would be coming down to the business with his father in the mornings, he would be demanding the whys and wherefores of this process and that, things would have to be explained to him, A, B, C's, matters of course, would have to be made clear. It would be a nuisance, certainly, after all these independent close-mouthed years.

He might even want to institute changes, improvements, innovations . . . These college graduates! Well . . . Martin closing the desk ready to go home rubbed his nose and sighed . . . he could put up with the nuisance he 'guessed' for the sake of having Nicholas here, a son in the business, a sympathizer, a loyal supporter. If only Nicholas were just a little . . . different. He was a nice kid enough, good-looking, intelligent, sweet-tempered. But he was darned mysterious. You could never tell what he was after. He'd answer any questions about himself and his doings, often discreditable enough to have prompted a natural reserve, with the most disconcerting frankness. He had none of the shame, the 'swank' of most youths of his age. But what he would be

like as a partner in the rubber business, the Signal Mountain Enterprise and the Cedar Grove Pleasure Park, it was impossible for his father even remotely to imagine. Nicholas was more strange than a stranger. He'd have to get to know the boy, find the key to him. Maybe he was only shallow, a butterfly, maybe he was very deep indeed . . . dangerous. In either case he was a most peculiar chap in his own elusive way and would have to be pinned down. Practical business experience ought to be immensely good for him. If Angela had been a son. . . . Ah! There was a shrewd, clockwork, and calculable mind for you.

Martin, smiling proudly over his daughter's wonderful and wasted gifts for sonship, locked his desk and went out of his office past the glass door of that other room next to his which he had recently fitted up in a magnificent fashion for the reception of Nicholas. Nicholas's name in black letters was marked in against the glass. Martin stepped through the door for a last appraising look. Nicholas would no doubt be coming down to-morrow to see the place. Well, he couldn't complain of his quarters certainly. Martin tested out the leather swivel chair . . . damn comfortable. Lots more style and convenience than he'd ever been able to get round to for himself. There would be a first-rate stenographer too, waiting for the junior partner, one that knew the ropes, nothing young or pretty . . . 'not on your life,' but a regular treasure, able to run the business herself, if necessary, and to correct, tactfully, Nicholas's early blunders. Yes . . . it would be good to have the boy there, beside him, under his hand. Some one to lean on, later, when the days for leaning came. If only . . . ! Martin shook himself like a big wet dog and stumped energetically down to his car with a bluff air of cheerfulness.

His chauffeur was waiting for him at the entrance.

'Take me to the station, Frank . . . we've time to make that 5.04, haven't we? I'd like to meet Mister Nicholas.'

'Yes, sir.' Frank held open the door. 'It'll be first-rate to have him home, sir, won't it?'

Frank's face looked really eager and human and pleased. 'Now why,' thought Martin, 'should Frank feel like that?' Youth . . . that was it, he supposed, they were both young . . . Frank and Nicholas . . . Nicholas would chatter to him about baseball games and prize-fights, and give him cigarettes and generally ruin him. Nicholas had a lot to learn . . . a lot to learn. College over, education could begin. The elder Gregory whose education was still in progress blew a big and anxious breath. He wished, somehow, that he hadn't so long postponed coming into close grips with Nicholas. He felt powerless and incompetent. It was a sensation neither pleasant nor familiar to this masterful materialist.

Nicholas had not been in the house two hours before he had heard all about the banishment of Hunt and Hesther Anne. It was no use planning a silence or an evasion because Nicholas simply asked questions.

'Tell me about the row with Mr. Hunt, Father? I hear you turned him out.'

They were at dinner, one of the elaborate dinners Caroline especially provided for Angela's visits: two footmen and a butler and a lot of flowers and silver and lace, big embroidered napkins, three kinds of wine, innumerable courses. The dining-room was heavily wainscoted and dark, but there was a banqueting lamp with a large silk shade in the middle of the table and all around the ceiling there shone small electric bulbs. Caroline's portrait by Chase, a magnificent reproduction of yellow satin and pearls, faced a buffalo's head, killed by some adventurous Simpson in the days of buffalo-hunts and Indian fighting. The buffalo looked surly, dusty, and hot, as though he would have liked to rush Caroline and impale her on his two thick short horns. There was a monumental sideboard loaded with silver, nervously kept very bright by the perpetually changing, perpetually terrified house-boy.

Martin ate heavily under the buffalo. He was getting stouter and redder as the years passed and his thick auburn

hair was disappearing from the top of his head. This spot and the back of his neck flushed stormily at Nicholas's question.

'I did nothing of the sort. He turned himself out, the d——d little fool. He went clean out of his head, Nicholas . . . ranting, screaming, psalm-singing crazy, not fit for a gentleman's pulpit. He's gone to preach to the slums, Creek Kaaterskill . . . about what he's good for, too. He quarreled with his Bishop. He'll never get his head up out of that mud again.'

'And Hesther Anne?'

'Went with him, of course. I tried to talk her out of it, but she's a pig-headed piece. She would go, if her father was bent upon it . . . straight to hell, I guess. Hesther has no horse-sense.'

'No. She has no horse-sense,' Nicholas agreed softly in a tone that conveyed both tenderness and admiration.

'I'm sorry for the girl . . . ' Martin began.

('She's lost her looks lately,' put in Caroline.)

'But I dare say she'll learn by experience. She's young enough yet . . . '

('We have such a nice Englishman now at Saint Matthew's,' chanted Angela with, suddenly, rather an English accent, 'a perfect darling . . . with the softest "a's." He intones. It's a pleasure to hear him.')

'Where are they living, Father?'

'How the devil should I know? I don't visit Creek Kaaterskill myself. For some reason or other, I'm supposed to be responsible for it. As a matter of fact, it's just the dump-heap for Kaaterskill and Gissing's misfits. Every man I fire, drunkard or slacker or what-not, and every man that can't make a go of it in any other Kaaterskill concern, generally winds up at the Creek. Every girl that goes to the dogs . . . goes there. They all end there by the Creek and breed typhoid. Mind you, Hunt hasn't kept hold of any of my employees, none of the good sort. The kind that started coming to Saint Matthew's aren't following him, not a bit of

it. It's just the refuse, the out-of-a-job anarchist who is a failure by his own fault and wants to soothe himself by shrieking about tyranny. Bah! They say Hunt's preaching against me, calls me a "Pharaoh." He can't hurt me any, I guess.'

'No. He can't hurt you any. He's rather small game for you, Father,' said Nicholas, his voice slipping in like a cool slim rapier after the broadsword rattle of his father's speech. 'Why didn't you start a Mission Chapel down there and put Hunt in charge on a small salary? That would have been good business, wouldn't it? Nobody could have held the Creek morals against you then and Hunt would have been robbed of the splendors of martyrdom.'

It was a 'd——d good' business idea, thought Martin, but he didn't want to say so and in the brief silence Caroline took masterful hold of the situation and she and Angela lifted the table-talk at once to a higher level, well above the possible fate of Hunt and Hesther or the impossible doings of Creek Kaaterskill.

While the others were sipping their after-dinner coffee, Nicholas rose and wandered towards the door, taking up the soft hat he had carelessly left on the chair as he came into the room.

'Where are you going, Nicholas?' asked his mother.

'Down to see Hesther Anne, of course.' He smiled at them in an open fashion, ready for flight, however, and moving away as soon as he had spoken.

'Hold up a minute, Nicholas. Don't be in such a hurry about it. You've got to think of me, you know. I'm not on speaking terms with Hunt. He's trying to stir up trouble against me and . . . look here . . . now that you're coming into the business . . . will be in your office in a fortnight or so . . . it won't do for you to be seen dashing down to visit the Hunts as though you were taking their part, will it?'

Nicholas had gone three steps on his way, but now he stopped and turned back slowly. There was an odd bewildered look on his face.

'Am . . . I . . . going into the rubber business?' he asked.

Martin turned white. Caroline, very red, broke out harshly, 'Nicholas!' Angela's nose pinched itself narrow at the nostrils and she lifted her right eyebrow, the more nearly perfect one.

Nicholas's eyes moved from his father's sudden pallor . . . how queer he looked when he was pale, old almost! . . . to his mother's angry scarlet, passed over Angela and her eyebrow, and came back to Martin. He walked over to his father and stood close beside him, looking down and turning his soft hat in his hand.

'You don't really want me in the business, do you, Father?'

His voice was low and unlike itself.

Martin looked up and put his hand on the boy's arm where the heavy fingers clutched.

'Nicholas . . . what was it for . . . if it wasn't for you? I've been waiting . . . ever since you were a baby . . . all your life . . . for this. I've got your office fitted up for you, your name's on the door. The men have been told. They're waiting. I took the thing for granted. I'm starting you on a salary of eight thousand a year. I'm not going to be mean. I want you to be your own master. Later, you'll come into partnership. You can marry any girl you like . . .'

'Provided of course she'll have me,' suggested Nicholas to fill up the broken pause.

'No trouble about that. She'll jump at you. It's all right, isn't it, my boy?' Martin tried to keep the shaking suspense out of his voice.

'Of course. I didn't know you'd want me . . . not much of a business man, I'm afraid. But you can break me in, I guess.'

He smiled again down into Martin's eyes and Martin, dazzled, let him go with a half-gasping exclamation of relief.

Nicholas started more swiftly for the door.

'Where are you going?' demanded Angela sharply.

'Down to see Hesther Anne,' said Nicholas over his shoulder. 'I think it would be better business to close the breach. I mean to build that Mission myself one of these days.'

He laughed and disappeared. Angela exchanged despairing glances with her mother.

'Oh, Martin, why did you let him go? He'll be sorry for Hesther Anne and . . .'

'Hell!' shouted Martin in one of his sudden fits of exasperation. He had been through a hideous moment of fear and in reaction was ready to take it out now on his wife and daughter. 'Blame me, why don't you? I don't care if he does fall in love with Hesther Anne . . .' ('Hush, the servants!' inserted Caroline ineffectually.) 'He can marry her if he likes. She's a fine, sweet, honest, pretty girl, and Nicholas has more sense than the rest of you . . . that's all.'

'It's dangerous for him to go down there,' panted Caroline. 'They say some of those people are in an ugly mood. Hunt's been stirring them up against you . . . He has on his white flannels . . . he'll be so conspicuous . . .' She rose and ran out into the hall, looking a queer excited figure in her spangled dress, a stiff aigrette quivering on top of her waved hair: frightened, hawk-like.

'Oh, Nicholas . . . Nicholas!'

A man in a purple livery came quickly forward anxious to appease his tyrant.

'He's just gone, madam, just this minute. He's on foot, madam . . . Shall I . . . ?'

'No, no, William. It doesn't matter.'

Caroline went across the black-and-white squares of the marble pavement through heavy portières into the Chinese room. She was trembling with anger and alarm so that the aigrette trembled too. Nicholas's first evening at home and he had defied her and his father! She intended to be mistress of her house, and so long as Nicholas lived in it, he must respect her, and obey her. She placed herself near a teak-

wood table under a lamp and took up the newspaper. The lamp smoked and, pressing an electric button with her strong stubby little forefinger, Caroline, bolt-upright and wrinkled, waited, and, while waiting, composed a formidable tongue-lashing for the delinquent parlor-maid, a recent graduate from the Active Ant Industrial Hill.

CHAPTER IX

SALVATION

NICHOLAS in his white flannels went swiftly down over the ridge to Creek Kaaterskill, the dusk folding itself softly about him. Because of an adventurous and democratic boyhood he knew his Kaaterskill and Gissing's far better than Little John did and remembered a canny short cut that avoided the coal-yard and the dump-heap. The tenements with their sparse lights glimmered not unbeautifully along the polished black waters of the creek.

Nicholas entered the settlement by the very alley along which John had beaten his retreat two or three weeks before, so it happened that he saw Hesther Anne through her open and uncurtained kitchen window before he had to make any inquiries concerning her front door. Her glass lamp was as bright as crystal and under it she was busy with a coffee-pot. He ran along the alley, whistled, caught her startled eyes, and climbing in at the window, dextrously vaulted a table full of utensils and, taking her in his arms, kissed her on both cheeks.

Hesther leapt from him like a deer, less timid, however, than angry, by the look of her.

'Nicholas! How wicked of you to frighten me like that! I'm glad to see you. How dare you kiss me? Look . . . you've spilled my coffee.'

'What are you doing? Washing up? May I help?'

'I'm making coffee for poor Papa. He has just come in absolutely exhausted. He was at the bedside of a terrified old sinner all the afternoon and now he is too tired to eat. W-when did you get back, Nicholas?'

'This evening. I'll make the coffee for you. It's not a percolator, is it? How much do you put in . . . one cup or two?'

'Two heaping tablespoons. There's a kettle on the stove. Have you heard? I mean, has Mr. Gregory . . . ?'

'You have to settle it with cold water in this kind of a pot, don't you? Why haven't you got a percolator? The coffee is a lot better and it's easier to make. I'll give you one for your birthday. Where's your father? In there? I want to speak to him.'

'Nicholas . . . wait a mo—'

Nicholas went into the parlor.

'Hullo, Mr. Hunt. It's Nicholas Gregory. How are you, sir? This is interesting, isn't it? I heard all about the schism as soon as I set foot in Kaaterskill. Father met me in his car, but before he came I had five minutes' talk with Crool . . . and five minutes of Crool is worth a century of Cathay. It's a great idea to come down here where you're needed so awfully. But I can tell you where the one only comfortable house down here is and I think you might get it. You haven't bought this place, have you?'

Julius Hunt, a ghostly figure, hollow-eyed, had risen automatically, had allowed Nicholas to shake his hand and now, in what was left of his voice tattered by an afternoon's exhortation, he managed to arrange some words.

'No . . . no . . . we . . . I rented it . . . for a year.'

'Well, then, when your time's up, I can show you a first-rate house, clean as a whip and not far away, just where Gissing's meets you. You could rent a couple of floors even if you couldn't get the whole house. Let me bring you your coffee. Hesther, may I have some too? I came away while the family was sticking its nose-tips into those thimbles. I like a big cup and cream and a full-sized spoon to stir with.'

'Does your father understand that you are coming to visit . . . me . . . his enemy?' asked Julius in a hollow and portentous voice.

'Yes. That is, I don't think he regards it in just that light, Mr. Hunt . . .'

'Oh, please, Nicholas,' begged Hesther Anne, plucking at his coat-sleeve, 'he's so tired. Don't start anything. I couldn't bear it.'

'I'm not starting anything. Where's the coffee? Get back "to your distaff, woman." Shall I put the lamp on the table? I bet you painted this table, Hester. You didn't get round to the inside of the legs, but it's a bully table. It's meant for an ironing table, isn't it? but you can make it into a bench. I'm going to have one like it only I think I'll lacquer it Chinese red and have some chairs to match . . .'

Nicholas who could be silent could also become a chatter-box when it best suited his ends. He talked Julius and Hesther past the possibility of awkwardness, emotion, resentment, or gratitude. He brought Hunt almost to a mood of human sociability, the first he had relaxed into since the change in his fortunes. The wan, strained, serious face broke into a smile.

'You haven't lost the use of your tongue at Princeton, have you, Nicholas?'

Nicholas blushed and looked up from his big white china coffee-cup.

'I'm talking too much . . . This sort of thing excites me. It's so adventurous . . . what you and Hesther are doing. You look to me like a couple of spiritual pirates. I don't mean that exactly either . . . nor highwaymen . . . but some sort of swashbuckling, big-chested adventurers. It's great and must be a big relief after Saint Matthew's. Weren't you bored sometimes with that congregation, Mr. Hunt?'

Julius's eyes dimly kindled. 'Never. The Shepherd is not bored with his sheep, my dear boy.'

'But they were all so grayish-white. No excitement saving people who are so sure they're saved already. I'm partial to sinners myself.'

'What house were you thinking of for us, Nicholas?' asked Hesther Anne, frightened by the dazed and fascinated look on her father's white and black face, lifted with a startled air to Nicholas.

'Oh,' the young man turned round in his chair to give her his attention and she was surprised to see that there were under his brilliant young eyes marks as black as those of

Julius. 'It's a nice little white house on the edge of Gissing's, where you touch Gissing's, not far from here and right in the center of things. I'll tell you in a sec who owns it . . . used to, anyway . . . a dressmaker . . . Devinney . . . Bessie Devinney . . . Miss or Mrs. . . .'

Hesther turned vividly scarlet and even into Julius's dead-white face a little color rose.

'What's the matter?' asked Nicholas, looking quickly from one face to the other. 'Don't you like her? She used to be a nice little person, pretty, with fuzzy hair and big gray eyes, a sort of thin Madonna face. She was nice to me when I'd run away down here, had me in and gave me jelly and bread.'

'When did you know her, Nicholas?' asked Hesther softly, her eyes on her empty cup.

'When I was a kid. I used to play with her boy Tom, her son or her nephew or something . . . and fight with him too. He got fired from the Kaaterskill school . . . I never knew what for. He seemed a nice enough kid, rather surly, and he would tease the girls. I remember he made you cry, Hesther. Have you forgotten Tom Devinney?'

'Oh, no.' Hesther rose and set the coffee-pot on the tray, Nicholas standing up to help her. He let the subject of Bessie Devinney drop, for he saw that it was making them both, for some reason, uncomfortable.

'I'll wash up with you, if you'll let me, Hester. Here, give me an apron. You sit down and dry. What a rotten sink!'

Nicholas washed deftly with his clean brown hands and fell silent as he washed, his lips resting rather closely one against the other.

'Tell me, Nicholas . . . I must know, please . . . won't your father be angry about you coming here? Please tell me frankly.'

'No. Of course he won't. What sort of mediæval tyrant do you think he is? Just because your father and he had a difference and couldn't run together in theological harness,

did you really think, Hesther, he would forbid me to speak to you? You've lost your sense of humor.'

Hesther dried a cup and saucer, ashamed of her quivering lips. 'We're very serious . . . now . . . down here,' she managed to tell Nicholas.

'So I gather . . . fruits of observation.'

'Nicholas . . . are you glad to be home? . . . glad to be through with college? What are you going to do?'

'I am going into the rubber business, of course.'

It was a colorless statement and Nicholas, in making it, did not look up.

'Oh, yes. Of course. Do you like the rubber business?'

'I don't know much about it. I ought to have looked into it. I'm a fool about the future . . . never think ahead. Every one's taken it for granted that I was to be Father's partner . . . except me. When he talked about it, which was never much nor often, I thought he was . . . well, sort of generalizing . . . about young men and business . . . you know . . .'

'But what do you *want* to do, then?'

'Hanged if I know!' Nicholas laughed desperately. 'You see . . . I hate to look ahead. I love the minute I'm in, the day I'm in . . . but as soon as I think about the future . . . even to-morrow . . . everything turns black. I want to . . . die.'

'Nicholas! That's very queer . . . and wrong . . . and unhappy.'

'Do you like the future, Hesther Anne?'

'It's all the same to me . . . past, present, future . . .' She thought a long minute, looking seriously up at him, the little specks floating in her clear amber eyes. 'I feel trustful about it . . . the way you do when you're little and put your whole hand inside of some grown person's . . . some one who is walking beside you and who loves you.'

Nicholas turned to look down at her.

'How do you get that way?' he asked, his face bitter with envy and sweet with tenderness.

'I've never felt any other way.'

'It's enough to make a man believe in predestination. Maybe some people *are* chosen. I know I wasn't. Do you think I can crawl in hanging to the hem of your garment, Hesther? . . . Hullo, who is all that?'

'All that' was an arriving knot of visitors for Mr. Hunt. Nicholas looked eager.

'Is he going to preach? . . . Or pray? May I come?'

Hesther laughed in spite of herself at his frank curiosity.

'It isn't the right spirit, is it, Nicholas?'

'Why not? Please let me, Hesther. I want to see how he does it. How he gets hold of these people . . . Honestly, I'd like it. I'll be good. Don't I look all right? Wait, I'll take off the apron and put on my coat.'

'Then you'll be the only person wearing a coat. But, Nicholas, do wait. They . . . some of them . . . used to be your father's employees and he's fired them for one cause or another and they're bitter about it . . . and some of them wanted to go to Saint Matthew's . . . you see . . . they have a grievance. So perhaps . . . they won't like seeing you here. Besides, you look so . . . clean.'

'My Lord!' ejaculated Nicholas, 'they must be awful snobs. I want to meet them anyway.' His eyes were as brilliant as Caroline's. 'They won't tear me to pieces like the French mob, will they? — just because I am "clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful." Come on, Hesther, don't be mean and selfish. Let me creep in behind you. I've got to go. They're starting a hymn . . . a regular snorter . . . I want to sing.'

He broke from her and stepped into the prayer-meeting.

Hunt was hardly to be recognized as the exhausted withered little being of a few minutes before. He had revived as though under the effects of a philter, even his voice had come back. He stood beside the painted table, his finger-tips resting on it, his eyes closed, his chin lifted, and led the singing. To Nicholas, while he sang with a seraphic ease and sweetness, looking over the printed pamphlet of a hollow-

ched girl with the body of twelve and the face of thirty, as he knelt for prayer and sat for exhortation, there came a vivid and incongruous impression . . . of a fox-hunt. Salvation was the fox and these queer people were off after it, view-halloo, down the hill and over the hedge and through the water, scrambling and yelling, white faces and red, danger and escape . . . and the fox in sight. So obsessed was he by his simile that when after the last prayer Hunt held up his hand, Nicholas half-expected to see in it a dangling reddish little body. They had had a good run and were in at the death. He felt stiff as though with hard fast riding.

Hardly was the last prayer cold on Julius's lip when a short, red-nosed man, his suspenders wet with perspiration, thrust himself through the little group and shouldered up to Nicholas, who had thought himself practically unnoticed.

'Say, you Martin Gregory's boy?'

Nicholas was rather formal and polite, as he should have been . . . and probably wasn't . . . at one of Mrs. Harry Crane's garden-parties.

'Yes. I am Mr. Gregory's son. My name is Nicholas. You are — ?'

'Never you mind who I am. I worked for your father, up at the fact'ry, see? They say you're goin' to come into the business. Well, there's some things I can tell you about the business what won't do you no harm to know afore you get yourself into it . . . see?'

'Father fired you, I suppose,' said Nicholas.

The man's face turned ugly in a flash.

'Yas, he fired me. Want to know what fer?'

'If you want to tell me . . .'

'Fer givin' him a piece of my mind . . . for tellin' him the trooth . . . that's what fer.' There followed a wearisome story enough, some old blustering matter of hours and rules and pay and whiskey . . . Nicholas listened attentively, the man's voice, very loud at the beginning, gradually quieting itself under the bright intent detached young gaze.

'I don't think that sounds very reasonable,' said Nicholas

when the last 'see' had been flung at him. With his answer a little hostile ripple went about the room, now thoroughly absorbed in this dialogue. Hesther Anne had her hands clenched and Julius was breathing hard. 'Look here, you don't see the other side of it, do you? You fellows begin to draw pay when you're in your teens and, if you keep to the rules . . . and every business has got to have its rules, I guess, or it couldn't keep going at all . . . you can draw a living wage before you're twenty, and get married if you like, and probably get pensioned when you're old. Now, Father couldn't even start his life-work until he was forty. He had to risk every cent he had and every cent he could borrow. The whole place was against him, especially his own family. He was poor and abused and ridiculed. I can tell you something about it.'

Nicholas gave them Martin's story, the story of the Rubber Enterprise. He was amazed at the wealth of detail which came rushing to his tongue. He had been a child, but in some half-conscious fashion and by later hearsay he must have absorbed a great deal of what was going on above his head. At any rate he spoke with a rich, racy, and lifelike accuracy, making them laugh over Martin's expedients, making them see the man, a fighter, with his back to the wall. There wasn't a man or woman there that didn't love a fighter. Cowards and slackers and failures . . . it was the fight in them, or the consciousness of defeat, that made them bellow and shout salvation. Most of them shook Nicholas's hand when they said good-night.

Nicholas, however, though he had undoubtedly done his father and the rubber business a good turn, had introduced a worldly and practical spirit into the gathering and, in so doing, had perceptibly diminished the powers of Julius Hunt. When he turned back to his host he perceived instantly and with a pang that he had incurred something very like an enmity. The life went out of him. He said 'good-night' humbly and awkwardly, avoiding Julius's bitter and exalted eye, and took his leave without further comment,

Hesther walking with him to the street-corner. He was afraid she too had come to hate him.

'Would you care to go out riding with me to-morrow, Hesther?' he asked with a great deal of uncertainty. 'In the motor, I mean. I'm going up to the mountains. It's too late for arbutus, of course, but there ought to be some laurel. There's a shanty there I mean to buy for a retreat some day when the factory has been burned down by an angry mob and Father and I are ruined. I want to look it over to-morrow. It has a well of the coldest water in New York State and a little overgrown vegetable garden where "many a pea is born to blush unseen" . . . that's what they call schoolboy wit, Hesther . . . Will you come?'

'Oh . . . let me ask Papa.'

She ran back to the house, whisked through the open door, and returned instantly, breathless.

'He says . . . "Yes, it will do me good." When, Nicholas?'

'About three o'clock to-morrow afternoon. I can't get the car down here, I'm afraid, so would you mind meeting me across the bridge? There's a road there. It isn't too far for you to walk . . . to meet me, is it? I can toot.'

'I should think not. Good-night, Nicholas. Thank you.'

. . . Laurel . . . and the clean hill-wind in her face . . . the great chariot throbbing under her, carrying her easily over all the rough stony places . . . Nicholas beside her, laughing . . . Hesther was happy! She felt that she could lift the ugly house and toss it like a bubble into the air. The very flies sailed on enchanted little wings. Everything was golden and bright and bauble-gay . . . an adventure, a search for treasure, a spiritual piracy. She went smiling, the grease-splattered tin candle-stick in her hand, up the steep boxed-in stairs to bed.

To-morrow . . . how she loved to-morrow!

But upon Nicholas, walking away, the spirit and grace gone out of his body, that to-morrow seemed to press with more than its accustomed weight. It wasn't only the reac-

tion of disappointment in finding these people not as he had expected, happy and released. It wasn't only the circumstances of their life, the dingy hideous house, the bad air, Hunt's exhaustion, Hesther's taut and anxious weariness, the shabbiness of her poor little shoes and dress, nor that horrible yelping, shouting, breakneck race after salvation . . . no, though all these had their part in his depression, the real cause lay in his own fate . . . the rubber factory. For once reality had got itself seated sturdily on Nicholas's back like that horrid old man in the fairy story. The future was settled.

He knew now just what his days would be . . . the office, business correspondence, prices, orders, sales, discounts, profits . . . He would be the 'boss' of such fellows as that man with the red nose who shot out 'see' and 'Uh?' with the air of spitting them. He would be smothered in a smell of rubber, he would come home like his father, dirty and preoccupied, to tub and dress for dinner. All this . . . for the production of automobile tires and the lining of the Gregory pocket. He'd draw, to begin with, that salary of eight thousand a year and as much extra as he chose to ask for. Nicholas knew only too well, knew with a sort of desperation, how it would be spent. But what else was there to do if he were to escape the ache of his impossible longing? Why was he so possessed? If he could only shout salvation like Julius, make a clamor and kill out his craving for that silent rapturous communion. It was not Hunt's passion, for all its raw and fiery eloquence, that could move him; it was Hesther's tender sense of safety. Why couldn't she teach him that? . . . the peace of God that passeth all understanding? He would never find it . . . the one great treasure, the mirage of all mankind . . . not with the smell of rubber in his nostrils, and the taste of rubber in his mouth, and the feverish throbbing of machinery in his ears. Ten thousand . . . twenty thousand . . . forty thousand . . . one hundred thousand . . . a year and nothing that he cared to buy with it but a sort of dizzy forgetfulness of life.

Why couldn't he want what other people wanted . . . a house of his own, a wife, children, a career? Philanthropy? Artistic creation? Politics? What was this horrible cold barrier between him and ambition, desire, worthy undertakings? Probably there was something wrong with his brain, afflicted with the one unappeasable passion for which there was no satiety, no food.

Julius, having thrown away the trappings, stripped himself light, should have been happy, perhaps he had found peace, but there was only fever in his face and eyes. Hesther, walking with her hand in God's . . . that was it . . . faith . . . like a little child's . . . but he, obfuscated, stupid, rigid with pride, he must wait and listen for some special revelation. What was it Johnnie had said, shyly, one day in his rooms when Stephen had been dissecting the religion of the modern man . . . oh, yes . . . 'What is good enough for people like my mother and Papa ought to be good enough for me.'

Nicholas forced himself to turn back from the mountain road. He'd have to give up that form of dissipation — wasn't that what Stephen called it? No more waiting upon the dawn in beautiful submissive silent loneliness. There would be a factory whistle to wait for instead.

His old friend . . . or enemy . . . of wakefulness was at his elbow and he could not force himself to go back to the house. Nevertheless, there was a night to be spent somewhere, somehow. Perhaps he could find a book, a friend. Hang it! There were no friends to be found in Kaaterskill. Billy Paxton, for some reason, wouldn't play with him. Little John would be in bed and Uncle Jo would certainly spank both of them if he threw gravel at the good boy's window. There ought to be some lovely señorita to serenade, but neither of the Blodgett girls was a lovely señorita. Oh, for some mad congenial spirit, male or female. There used to be a funny fat man at the brick saloon . . . Flaherty . . . the best company to be had in Kaaterskill or anywhere else, Irish, witty, full of tales. He'd go round to Flaherty's and

have a game of pool. There'd be some jolly spirits there, some talk and singing. Flaherty had a megaphone. Nicholas's steps quickened. He'd shout salvation to another melody. He'd had enough of the God of Hunt's Salvation for one evening!

CHAPTER X

THE ANGEL OF THE FLAMING SWORD

IN every year there is but one June and in every June there are but thirty days and in the life of every man June falls but once in his one and twentieth year. Little John spent this twenty-first June of his in a garden.

The greater part of his day, to be sure, kept him physically outside its walls, but as the essential part of him remained stationary in the canvas chair under Fane's apple tree, it is justifiable to use the more inclusive phrase. Outside of the walls the empty shell of Little John fed, washed, and clothed itself, amused itself languidly with books: it stood for moody half-hours before its mirror charging back and forth like an artist in front of his canvas, with a ruthless eye for physical defects. John imagined in these days that his head was too small for his body, that he had too long a nose, that his mouth and chin were conspicuously weak in structure, that his hands were a mile too long and betrayed feebleness of character, and that his clothes lacked dash and smartness. Was it the fault of their cut or of his own carriage? Should he wear gay colors or somber? Was a spotted tie permissible? Such problems agonizingly preoccupied the small portion of his spirit that accompanied his bodily departure from the garden. To the question of his law studies, of his lost university career, of his financial prospects, of the tremendous correspondence as to his fate now progressing between his father and Nathaniel Hands, Little John gave not so much as a shadowy gesture of thought. He barely heard his father's interminable hesitant exhortations and expositions, surmises and prophecies of this or that disaster, local, national, personal, or broadly human. He presented to Joseph a vague flushed air of submission, a murmur of 'Yes, Papa,' or 'Yes indeed, Papa,' at once soothing to an anxious

parent and provocative of hazy suspicions. Could it be possible that John Hands Moore Gregory, suspicion piercingly suggested, was harboring some fatal desire to become an artist, a writer, or a poet? This possibility smote Joseph with a swift conviction of failure and disgrace so that he sprang to examine Little John's papers. He found no evidence. The scrap-basket was sprinkled with the fragments of a note written to Lydia Fane in apology for too vehement a contradiction, but, knowing that he would see her before she could get the note, Little John had sensibly enough destroyed it. Pieced carefully together by Joseph, it was couched in language so formal, literary, and elaborate as rather to please him . . . quite different, certainly, from the tone of that correspondence with Susan Jay. His opinion of 'My dear Miss Fane' established itself immediately on the most solid foundations of esteem. He had never heard the stories about dancing 'in'r shimmy' while her father turned the hose upon her for 'coolness or for discipline,' and it was certain that he never would hear it, for there was something in the grave and careful cast of his countenance that kept such stories out of his ken.

The letter of apology proves that even June's enchantments are not without alloy and that in its very beginnings the garden romance was by no means serpentless. For one thing, other people liked to frequent that square of blue and green and gold as well as Little John. College being over, there was a return of youth to Kaaterskill.

John was greatly distressed by a mysterious, an incredible unwillingness to see his Cousin Nicholas. He could not understand it. A growing depression, a sinking of the heart whenever Nicholas's name was mentioned, seriously alarmed and bewildered him. Waking in the morning with a free heart, there would fall a sudden mysterious gloom. Why? Because he had remembered that in a few days Nicholas would be back . . . But . . . a preposterous explanation . . . ! if it hadn't seemed to explain. He found himself making elaborate plans for Nicholas's entertainment. He would take

that bright-eyed fascinating cousin instantly down to see Hesther Anne. Nicholas would be sorry for their little friend, he'd want to cheer her up. Then perhaps Nicholas could be persuaded to join the prospected Picnic Club of the Blodgett girls. To persuade convincingly Little John might have to join it himself, but that was a small sacrifice to make for a beloved cousin. The Blodgett girls were exceptionally nice girls and rather pretty, especially the younger one, and they had lovely sensible nice ways. Conventional girls were better for a man like Nicholas than any one a bit Bohemian and different. Angela would approve of the Blodgett girls for Nicholas. Angela had a great deal of worldly wisdom.

Poor Johnnie, writhing in the grasp of his own temperament, by no means recognized the fangs of the green-eyed snake even when they bit at his entrails. He loved Nicholas, but while inventing every sort of benevolent reason, he would have driven him from that garden with whips of wire.

Full of such plans for his cousin's social diversion and moral betterment, he came on the day after that young man's reported return to Kaaterskill, along Maple Lane, slowly towards the gate of Lydia's garden. It was four o'clock, the garden was already occupied. Half-way down the lane, John heard Lydia's laughter and Pepper's voice vaulting the wall with its cracked fifteen-year-old uncertainty. And it seemed to John, now that his hand lay on the latch, that there went another laughter with Lydia's. Reluctant, pale with his mysterious, undiagnosed malady, he opened the little gay wooden door.

Lydia lay on the grass beneath the apple tree and Nicholas Gregory stood over her, laughing. She had a glass of water on her forehead and was trying to rise without the aid of her hands, keeping the unspilled vessel in its position, between her wide young brows. She was very agile and very limber too, but even with an Egyptian dancer's muscular control it was a ticklish feat enough.

'You'll have to stop giggling, Lola, you goose, if you

expect to do it,' said Nicholas. (But he must know her very well, then, to use that loathsome family nickname and to call her 'goose.' There was an element of deception in this unexpected intimacy. They had combined, the two of them, to cheat a loyal friend and a loving relation!)

Pepper's legs dangled from the apple tree. He was eating cherries . . . out of perversity no doubt (Pepper, John thought, would be certain to eat cherries from his cap in an apple tree) . . . and spitting the pits with violence high in the air. One of them missed the loyal friend and loving cousin as he passed.

'Look out for pits . . . and spits,' said Pepper vulgarly.

John paid him no heed.

'Be careful, Miss Fane,' he said. (Nicholas might be made to feel the inappropriateness of 'Lola, you goose,' its offensiveness to the ears of a more sensitive and dignified visitor.) 'You'll get yourself wet and catch cold.' (She ought not to lie that way at Nicholas's feet, with her hair spread against the turf and her long throat shadowed by green grass stems . . . How white her skin was against that verdure . . . it made her eyes look green . . . They were very clear and mocking like a soulless fairy's. She should be more womanly.) He spoke to Nicholas and for the first time in their lives failed to look him with a sort of soft adoring fervor in the eyes. Did Nicholas feel the pang of a deserted god? He was evidently very glad to see Little John, his aloof young face with a new carved look about the lips brightened happily.

'I thought you'd be along,' he said. 'It's great here, isn't it? It makes me sick to think we sold this place and now I can see what might have been done with it.'

'But think of your swans, Mr. Gregory,' said Pepper with malice, peering down with his bright-eyed little dark face from the tree, and he began to sing Lohengrin's Farewell, punctuating it by violent projections of his cherry pits.

Lydia rose, her hands balancing, her head bent back so that the throat looked like that of the faithful swan itself,

and upset the glass of water all over Little John, dressed with an extraordinary attention to detail.

She tried to dry him off with her handkerchief, an impulsive service which disconcerted him unbearably. Nice girls don't rub young men's necks and collars and trouser legs with their pocket handkerchiefs.

'Everything I do shocks Mr. Little John Gregory,' she complained to Nicholas; then, flashing her naughty eyes at her censor, she went on, 'Just you wait until you meet my Cousin Rick Mercer . . . if *I* shock you.'

'Will I have to meet him?' asked Johnnie rudely.

The angry color smote Lydia's cheeks and she shut her eyes into the slits of a young cat.

'No. Not if you choose to keep away from here. He comes to see us very often . . . not quite so often as you do because he lives farther away. Nicholas, I'll ask *you* to dinner with him. He says the most amusing things and the awfulest you ever heard. I adore him and he adores me, but he's rather ferocious about other women.' (Other *women* indeed! snorted the censor to himself.) 'Last time he was here he said something about women. Let's see . . . He said . . . "They're two kinds of women: the ones that say 'no' and have to be beaten and the ones that say 'yes' and have to be locked up." Which kind do you think I am, Mr. Little John Gregory?'

'Call him "Johnnie," why don't you? He likes it,' suggested Nicholas.

'I don't admit the correctness of your cousin's category,' said John sententiously.

He hated Nicholas. He despised Pepper. He loathed Lydia. And hating, loathing, and despising them was wretchedness unspeakable, for did he not love and worship and adore all three of them?

More of these inexplicable torments were reserved for him.

Lydia announced: 'We're going to get a tutor for Pepper so's he can be sent to boarding-school. Nicholas told Father to try for Stephen Hands. Isn't he a cousin of yours,

Johnnie?' She had taken up almost too easily that suggestion of Nicholas's as to calling him by his first name.

By this time they were drinking raspberry vinegar and the elder Fanes were present. Johnnie choked on sponge cake, set down his glass, and, as soon as his windpipe would allow him, spoke, for him, very rapidly.

'Oh, no, Mr. Fane, I shouldn't think Stephen would do at all,' then caught Nicholas's astonished and reproachful look and was scorched, face, neck and shoulders, with the burning of his shame. Poor old Stephen! A chance for pleasant and profitable employment, a chance for a summer in this happy garden. But the words had been spoken and Mrs. Fane looked decidedly inquisitive.

'What do you mean, Johnnie? Don't you think he'd be the right man for Pepper?'

'He's splendid,' said Nicholas, 'a genius for tutoring, and if it's mathematics you want for Pepper . . .'

'Oh, scholastically he's right enough,' said Little John. 'I . . . I didn't mean . . . I dare say you'll like him a lot, Mrs. Fane. I'm sorry I spoke.'

'But if it's something about his character . . . you must explain, John.'

Mr. Fane had fitted his long and weary fingers together just beneath his nose and was looking at Johnnie from under his antennæ eyebrows with a vague inscrutable look. John met his expression and, seeking Nicholas, found him hard of eye. Damn Stephen! He owed him nothing. Stephen had always been rude, insulting, superior, had turned him unceremoniously enough out of his rooms . . . like an intrusive dog.

'He's an atheist,' said Little John.

In the brief silence that followed, several portions of the church service, fragments of his catechism, disconnected texts, 'Yoke not yourselves with unbelievers,' 'The fool hath said in his heart there is no God,' something vaguely awful about the 'sin against the Holy Ghost,' marched confusedly, beating drums, about the walls of John's

conscience covered with great growths of ivy in the shape of self-protective 'compensations.' Also, cold and chuckling, he heard Hooker's voice . . . 'I am a jealous God. Thou shalt have none other gods but me.'

His eyes looking straight at Mr. Fane were the troubled eyes of lying childhood, but he fancied them the deliberate and just eyes of a man, of a soldier of God.

Nicholas leaned forward stiffly from his chair, his face straight and white with anger, ready by the suddenly tight-lipped look of him to annihilate Little John as he very well knew how to do upon occasion. Before he could pronounce his ruthless and terrible young judgment, however, the distinguished author of 'Masks,' and six other widely discussed novels, spoke. Fane had a low, remarkably pleasant voice. It was pleasanter even than usual.

'I believe I am going to be unselfish with this mathematical genius of yours, Nicholas, and give a friend of mine first chance. He's a chap with a boy about Pepper's age and he's going West on a ranch and wants a man of Hands's quality. What do you think, John? Does your objection hold?'

Little John thus deferentially consulted wore the air of Daniel.

'Why, sir, I tell you frankly, I hardly think it does. You see, in a life of that sort, on a ranch, out-of-doors, camping and that sort of thing, Stephen ought to be just right. And . . . and . . .'

'The question of his — er — atheism?'

'But that's just what I mean, sir. There wouldn't be any especial opportunity . . . I mean . . . it seems to me . . .'

'Ah, I see. Quite right you are, too. Riding and camping . . . there wouldn't be the same opportunity for discussion that there might be here . . . where we sit about and talk so much. That what you mean?'

'Exactly, sir. I think Stephen would just suit your friend. You won't let him miss the chance, will you, sir? You'll write, or wire? Stephen is a brilliant man and an awfully

good teacher. He'd make any fellow study. His pupils always get through their exams with credit. And they like him too. He's very well liked by the men that know him best. He's the sort of chap your friend would like . . . I mean . . . an out-of-doors man . . . Stephen is sort of presentable . . . if you know what I mean . . . and quiet and interesting . . . full of ideas, but doesn't talk too much . . . sort of . . . I know your friend would like Stephen. And for a young man Steve has lots of authority. I don't know what kind of boy the boy is . . .'

'Rather a handful, clever and spoiled, nervous . . .'

'Then your friend just couldn't get a better man than Steve. There isn't a man I know of, not at Steve's age, that has his gift for handling people and — er — situations. He's a magnificent disciplinarian and he can get away with it, too, without losing his pupils' liking . . . if you know what I mean.'

John paused, breathless. He was flushed with the eagerness of his praise and of his pleading. Lydia's astute and courageous eyes rested upon him, Nicholas looked completely bewildered and confused. Mrs. Fane had sought and caught for an instant her husband's eye and was now gazing vaguely off across the garden about an inch above Johnnie's head, a Mona Lisa smile upon her lips.

Little John was completely astonished and chagrined when, a week later, he learned from Lydia that Stephen Hands had been definitely engaged, as a resident tutor, to teach Pepper during the summer.

'I thought your father understood my objection,' he said.

This time he was alone with Lydia. It was evening, the little pinkish house was vague in its gentle shadows, a comfortable twilight darkened the walls and treetops and the two young people were dim shapes to each other's eyes. John sat on the grass at Lydia's feet and she from her wicker chair looked down at him. Their silence was a groping, tender, asking thing, but their speech was sharp and crude and made wounds.

'Why do you suppose, Johnnie, that my father would give any weight at all to an objection of yours?'

John drew himself sensitively together. 'I don't know. I mean . . . I should think he might because after all he doesn't know Stephen and I do.'

'Isn't Stephen your cousin? Hasn't he been a friend of yours? I should think you'd want him to come here . . . to us. Perhaps you think he's too good for Pepper . . . or that I might shock him with my ideas.'

'He's my cousin, distantly, but he's not a friend of mine. And I don't think anything of the sort. He *is* an atheist.'

'That was a rotten thing to say.'

'Why . . . rotten, if you please?'

'Take away a man's reputation and try to spoil his chances.'

'I didn't do anything of the sort . . . I . . .

'When he's poor, too, and has to work his way through college and . . . a cousin of yours . . . I hate and despise a man who talks down another man behind his back.'

There was a silence.

'You hate and despise everything I say and do,' said John in a strangled voice. 'Just because I was thinking for your brother.'

'That's not the truth.'

John started to rise. 'I think I'd better go home.'

'That is not the truth. You don't care a snap about Pepper's religious training. Of course you don't. Father saw through you, so did mother, so did I. I don't care' . . . this referred to a gesture of Little John's . . . 'I just have to be honest. You didn't want Stephen to come here because you know he's clever and attractive and interesting and you like to be the whole show. You think you discovered us, Johnnie, and you want to keep us, father and mother and Pepper and me and the raspberry vinegar . . . all to yourself.'

John, on his feet and actually trembling, cried out. 'So that's what you think of me! It never occurred to me that

any one could find *me* c-clever or attractive . . . or interesting . . . n-never.'

The passionate and quivering, quite irrelevant, sincerity of this outcry gave Lydia pause. The sail of her triumphant anger slackened and she began to tack a trifle.

'If only you'd be honest,' she grieved. 'You do things for one reason and you imagine you do them for another. At least, you fool yourself into thinking it. We're used, as a family, to seeing through ourselves and one another. What do you care about Pepper's belief in God . . . honestly, Johnnie?'

'I care about any one's belief in God. That's the most important thing in any one's life, Lydia, and you ought to know it.'

Lydia stood up before him. She was shorter than he by a head and shoulders, but she lifted her chin and he could see the almost phosphorescent glisten of her eyes and the swift clean motions of her dark mouth.

'You talk about God as if He were a Gregory possession, something that had been given to you to take care of . . . like that precious parrot of yours. You don't love God. You're just stuck up about knowing Him. Nobody else understands God so well. You're a regular God-snob, John. What's more . . . you're afraid of Him.'

'What — what do you mean?' John stammered, naturally bewildered by these confusing and impious similes . . . 'What am I afraid of . . . Hooker?'

'No . . . of God.'

The Fear of God! John paused and listened to a faint cold voice . . . 'Aren't we supposed to fear Him?' asked John.

'I'm not afraid of Him . . . I'm not. And you can't make me. You might as well hear the worst about me now. I don't especially feel the need of God yet. Maybe I shall some day, when I've learned to be afraid . . . like you. I haven't any conviction of sin. I don't feel the need of being forgiven . . . saved . . . by any one's blood or pain or death. I'm not afraid to die. I don't think women ever are. It's men that

invented the Day of Judgment. I adore being alive. You like me, I suppose, or you wouldn't come here, but you're afraid to like me because I say things you don't approve of. I wish you . . . wouldn't come, then . . .' Some of the gleaming brightness of her eyes spilled over her face and she turned away with the quick slender abruptness of a child. 'It was . . . lovely . . . here in this garden . . . before you came . . .'

'I'm sorry I've spoiled it for you. Good-bye.'

He went straight towards the gate and through it and shut himself out into the full-leaved darkness of the lane. In all his dumb, unhappy life he had never been so dumbly unhappy. He stood in the darkness. The leaves moved confusedly, wretchedly, like the images in his mind. He was terribly afraid for Lydia . . . terribly. She had defied an awful unknown power. If he could, he would have hung an amulet about her neck. But, for all her danger, the garden would be bright and warm again with day. Stephen and Nicholas would frequent it. They would talk with the dear Fanes and laugh and sing. Lydia would hold her slender chin and slide her glistening eyes from one to the other of them, agreeing with their speech, admiring them, as he had thought, so wrongly, she was sometimes admiring him. She would laugh when they were amusing, shutting up her lids and tilting her chin . . .

Was it true that, for jealousy, he had tried to blacken Stephen's reputation? He couldn't have been so low as that? It must be the truth that he cared for Pepper's belief in God. It must be. A nice girl would never have imagined him capable of such a meanness. Hadn't he always been a loyal man? Take Nicholas, for instance . . . he'd been the truest friend to Nicholas . . . Nicholas's rigid face of condemnation on that day a week before came to chastise him tardily. So Nicholas too had thought he was mean, a traitor and a Pharisee.

Lydia would love Nicholas who never talked against other men and who didn't care a 'rap' for any one's belief in God and who loved life just as she did, and wasn't afraid of any-

thing at all. Yes, Lydia would love Nicholas. It would happen just as he had feared.

With a knifelike suddenness of pain Little John knew that this Lydia, this heathen whom he hated and who had hurt him so, who said things so terrible that they caught his breath, who had dismissed him from her garden for meanness and dishonesty and cowardice . . . was in possession of his soul. It was the strongest power of his nature, this possessibility, this power of loving, and at twenty Little John loved with an intensity, a single-mindedness, a deep and pure completeness rarely possible even to maturity. His nature rose up in him that night and took him in its hands, breaking and bending him. It threw him all night long about the roadways of the county. He came home, white, exhausted, tear-stained, at dawn. Fortunately Joseph had mistaken the servant's earlier arrival for Johnnie's and had gone unsuspectingly to bed.

The house was dark and close and sultry. The dawn had not penetrated it. John's little room smelled of matting and of hot old woodwork painted years before. John surrendered himself to its lifelessness, its hopelessness, in a complete despair.

June was over. This was a night of hot July.

All through that long July, John did not once go into the garden. It was not because he feared Lydia's candid severities, neither was it because of pride. He was held away by the terror of his love. He was afraid. He dared not meet the girl's eyes. He fancied that at once the slow consuming fires of his nature would spring upon her and devour her little young body and her virgin heart. This slim and vague-eyed lad going so quietly through his shadowy days was inarticulately possessed by an ancient emotion for the adequate description of which every language has been racked by the greatest of language torturers since man's tongue first broke the dewy silence of the world. Joseph had never felt towards his beloved Sarah Hands one quivering

tithe of the feeling which strangled his young son; Martin had not loved his Caroline Simpson so. Nicholas was incapable of such spiritual surrender, Stephen would keep at least one section of his brain untouched if only out of self-respect, but for poor Little John there was no limit set. He had neither the sublimation of a mystic nor the detachment of a scientist. He loved as some women love . . . abasedly. But unlike a woman in love he did not include himself in his own passion. A woman loves herself . . . Nature has cared with a curious subtlety for this concentration . . . she loves herself through her love for those whose desire she so desires. There is no sacrifice too great for the mighty enlargements of a woman's self-love. She loves herself splendidly, nobly, beautifully, and fiercely in a fashion without parallel elsewhere in Nature. Paradoxically she so loses her immediate lesser self in her love for these other-selves that for them she can give her body to be burned. It is the apotheosis of Other-selfness.

Little John had not this splendor, this translation. He could love with the absorption and the fidelity of a woman, but he could not escape the more aggressive and generous instincts of the male. His blood throbbed at his wrists and temples all the hot nights long as he lay still and straight and slender on his bed, his hands underneath his head, his soft and ardent eyes devouring the intense darkness of his window in which the stars burned little violet holes. All about the house, trees whispered, he could even, in the very silent small hours before the factory whistle blew, hear the great solemn faring of the river seaward. That was how his love for Lydia moved, a vast tide too strong for his youth. Lydia . . . Lydia . . . Lydia . . . her name was limpid and white like the moonlight. It floated, bright and cool, on the surface of his tide . . . Sunrise usually brought him some sleep. It restored an awareness of objective living. Even lovers, it would seem, are expected to get up and dress and go about their business.

Through the day jealousy threw love off its throne and set

a red-hot iron foot on John's heart. He knew that Stephen had come and was living in the garden. He knew that Nicholas often visited it. He avoided any possible meeting with either of them. Nicholas, coming to the house, was always told that John could not be found. Once, John went at an unearthly hour close to the garden wall and at that spot where there is a hollow and the grass grows up tall, he knelt and pressed his face against the plaster till his cheek ran blood. He longed for physical pain. He wanted to embrace some sharp clear agony.

Before the end of this exciting terrible month, Little John was so conspicuously wasted, being all dark passionate eyes, that Joseph took him in hand. He had him into the study and read aloud to him selections from the massive correspondence between himself and Nathaniel Hands.

John listened as to trees talking in a wind.

'So, with the advice of this eminent lawyer and dear friend to fortify my own judgment, John, I have at last . . . come to a decision.'

Joseph leaned back from the desk and drew the ruler through his lean dry hands. His eyes rested conscientiously and anxiously upon his son.

'It seems to me — er — it has seemed to me . . . advisable to send you to Philadelphia there to place you under the protection of your Aunt Abbey while you pursue your legal studies. I have already written to the Law School. You will require tutoring. Your aunt returns in September. I wish you to leave for Philadelphia on August the seventh . . . a Saturday. This will give you a day to get settled so that you may begin work on a Monday. You are to live at Aunt Abbey's house with the caretaker until Aunt Abbey's return. I want you to take advantage of a tutor' — Joseph by this phrase meant nothing nefarious towards the tutor — 'an excellent man, Samuel Lavender, whom I, by the advice of your cousin, Nathaniel Hands, have engaged for the purpose. He can give you six hours a day. The remaining four must be spent by you in preparation. I have engaged this man at

a price per hour which appeared to me in the first place prohibitive, but which, upon consideration of the great importance to your future, I have finally agreed to pay. This will necessitate a certain amount of sacrifice and curtailment on my part, but as I am reassured as to your good intentions, as I am persuaded of your repentance for past faults and resolutions of amendment, and as under the sober régime of Aunt Abbey's household you will not be exposed to any such temptations as assailed your weakness at the university, as, in fact, as . . . ' Joseph had lost the thread of a dissertation too involved and began to stammer, keeping his eyes fixed, however, with an increase of anxious severity on Little John who had become extraordinarily pale. 'It seems to me . . . that is . . . that I can . . . perhaps . . . it may be . . . *trust you.*'

Little John had thoroughly absorbed into his consciousness one sentence: 'I wish you to leave on August the seventh.' This he repeated in a low uncanny voice.

'You wish me to leave on August seventh.'

Joseph was delighted. Never had Little John come so quickly to a practical grip with discipline. He asked no questions, made no demur, merely repeated the order for departure . . . soldierly . . . beautiful.

Joseph laid aside the ruler and rubbed his hands.

'I shall be sorry to lose you, John. I shall always look back upon these two months as the sweetest time of companionship I have ever enjoyed with you.' (John had hardly spoken to his father except for the above-mentioned 'Yes, Papa's,' and 'Yes indeed, Papa's,' but Joseph was entirely sincere.) 'But it is for the best. If I hear good reports of you . . . Mr. Lavender is to write me a weekly letter . . . if the reports are really favorable . . . you may come home for Thanksgiving and for Christmas.'

John stood up. His face was now violently flushed.

'I must go,' he said, 'and see Lydia.'

And he left the study, forgetting for the first time in his life to close that ponderous door dutifully and softly behind him.

CHAPTER XI

No — No

AWARE neither of the curves nor angles of his way, John seemed to follow a straight line to Lydia's garden door. The heat of the afternoon was not felt by him, though it was the heat of a southern Spanish city, the Hudson town lying without power to breathe, between the glare of the white river and the blaze of the white sky. All along Maple Lane the trees had shrunk, their leaves shriveled, and blanched with heavy dust. John did not ring, but, as though sure of his June welcome, went quickly in, saw an empty garden and made straight for the side door of the house. As he passed the canvas chair under the apple tree, however . . . that home of his spirit . . . a voice spoke.

'What brought you back, Johnnie?' it said. 'A change of heart?'

Lydia lay in the chair and looked up at him with the lazy and insolent look of a young girl. The heat had thinned and paled her so that all the dense hair looked too heavy for her face, and her body seemed too slender for her queer large eyes. She was a very childish thing, John thought, and felt pitiful, achingly tender.

But she was far from his mood, she did not share in spirit the heat of the garden, her temperature being cool and detached.

'Have you decided at last to approve of me?' she asked him, melting her words like small slivers of ice on her tongue.

'Don't . . . don't quarrel, Lydia. I'm going away. I have to leave Kaaterskill. I'm going to Philadelphia on August seventh . . . a Saturday . . . to study law . . .'

'Really?' said Lydia.

She could not, of course, guess what volcanic days and nights had poured their molten floods over Little John since

the afternoon of their encounter, but seeing his face contract at her cold little word, she raised her body up in the chair, opened her eyes wider and looked at him more humanly.

'We've been having lots of good times,' she said, 'and we missed you. What's been the matter? Have you been sick?'

John stood and looked at her.

'You make me nervous. Please sit down somewhere . . . or something. Isn't it horribly hot? Are the mosquitoes bad at the Homestead? They've been awful here . . .'

John threw himself down on the turf beside her chair and hid his face in his hands.

'But, John . . . Johnnie! What is it? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be horrid. I . . . I've missed you truly. I thought . . . to stay away so long . . . you must hate me. I wrote three whole letters to you and tore them up because I was too proud to let you think I cared about your staying away. Please . . . Johnnie! Speak to me. Don't lie there. You're shaking. Have you a chill . . . or what?'

She came and knelt beside him and tried to lift his brown head between her hands. His long hot fingers moved over hers and pressed them, but he kept his face down.

'I . . . I can't,' he said. 'It's too much . . .'

'What is too much?'

'I didn't know. Nobody ever told me it would be like this.'

'What? What? Which . . . like what?'

She drew away her hands and sat back on her heels the better to consider his bewildering condition. In her sheer spreading white dress, with her face pale amongst the fairness of her hair, her blue eyes forgetful of naughtiness and merely anxious, her hands pointed together quaintly, she looked like a sweet little lost princess in a fairy tale. Back of her rose the golden wall and a bed of poppies, salmon pink.

John's scorched face lifted itself towards her.

'Loving you,' he said.

He kept his eyes planted darkly upon her, and after an

interminable look as wide and expressionless on her part as a baby's, her lids fell. She shifted back a little from him.

'No,' she said softly. 'Oh, no . . . no . . . no . . .'

Then she stood up and walked rapidly across the full width of the garden towards the small gate of white wooden lattices by which she had entered into John's life. There she stood with her back turned to him, twisting her hands together, moving her head slowly from side to side and saying monotonously under her breath, 'No . . . No . . . No . . .'

She had caught the infection of his trembling.

With the scented and droning garden space between them, they stayed minute after minute, Lydia resisting reality, John devouring it, until, hearing voices within the house, Lydia came flying back to her prostrate lover.

'Get up at once, Johnnie,' she said, 'and try to be human. Stephen and Pepper will be coming out any minute . . . and every one. I won't have them find us this way . . . I won't.' She was ready to cry.

John rose and pursued her fiercely as she made a swift backward escape before him until, coming against the apple tree, she stood perforce to face him. He gripped her shoulders in his hands and shook her. His face was perfectly unrecognizable, thin and fierce and dark as an Arab's with glittering eyes.

Don't say . . . "No." Don't you dare to say . . . "No" . . . to me like that.'

'Johnnie! Johnnie! Ouch . . . you're hurting me.'

'You're *killing me*,' said John. But his hands pulled themselves from her flesh as though they had grown so quickly into it.

She rubbed the places he had gripped, visibly red through the sheer material of her frock, and stared at him through tears.

'I — I can't help saying "No." I don't know what else to say. You frighten me.'

'Say "Yes," then,' he ground at her through his teeth.

'Yes,' gasped Lydia.

Before the faint little hissing of her 's' was safely in the air, his mouth fell upon hers. There was no awkwardness and no constraint in Little John's first kiss. He had been kissed before by Susan Jay, but Lydia was a first recipient. It was a kiss as wise as Adam's, and as young. No sooner were her crushed lips her own again than they cried 'No' and Lydia, rubbing them, thrust him away from her. 'No . . . No . . . No.'

Little John spoke without any hesitations, very rapidly, paying no heed to Lydia's emphatic interpolations.

'I'm going to Philadelphia to stay with my Aunt Abbey Gregory at 1699 Spruce Street and you can reach me there any time you want me . . .'

('I won't want you.')

'I'm going on like this loving you all my life and you must not say "No" . . .'

('No. No. No.')

' . . . to me or I'll certainly kill you. You may think that's a sort of joke or an exaggeration, but I really will kill you . . . because I love you so much that I could hate you so much that I'd have to kill you. If you don't understand that, it's because you don't understand anything and you'll have to learn. I'll be back at Thanksgiving unless you send for me before . . .'

('I won't. I won't.')

' . . . and then I'd advise you to have something better than "No" to say to me. You've said "Yes" once and I've kissed you.' Here his face changed entirely and his voice broke. 'Oh, Lydia, Lydia . . . darling . . . darling . . . You are so lovely. I love you so . . .'

'There's Stephen. Don't crowd me so, Johnnie . . . please.'

He had kissed her again, missing her mouth by an inch, and, before she could strike him as she certainly tried to do, he was out of her reach, making a meteor exit by the green slamming garden door. Lydia sat down abruptly at the foot of the apple tree and passed her hands over her face again and again, trying to sweep away the clinging and compelling lips, masterful and young, possessive and . . . intolerable.

'Cobwebs, Lydia?' drawled Stephen Hands above her. 'There's a lot of spiders in this apple tree . . .'

On the wings of his passion John returned to the Homestead. Its shrouded dimness received and smote him with a realization of defeat. He stopped dead just inside the threshold and lifted his shaking hand uncertainly to his lips. No . . . no . . . no . . .

The house was still with its late afternoon stillness. Joseph was no doubt at his desk in the study, Garvery dozing on the porch of his gate-house, Milly asleep in the kitchen chair with her mouth open . . . a household dedicated to middle age and slumber. John thought of his room and felt sick, of the hot outdoors and turned faint. He moved slowly down the hall and let himself into the big empty room known as the south parlor. He shut its door noiselessly behind him and stood leaning against it, his hands in his pockets, his head bent. He kept repeating to himself, 'I am going to Philadelphia to study law,' as though it was necessary to get the phrase by heart. He was trying to get a grip on the future, which was unbearably blank and insignificant. Law . . . Law . . . Law . . . what was the meaning of that, for instance? What interest had it for him? Law was what they applied to the cases of arrested drunkards, thieves, and murderers, it adjusted suits, quarrels between neighbors, boundary disputes, inheritances, divorce . . . Now, why in Heaven's name should any one want to engage himself with such appalling situations? Preparation would consist probably in studying past decisions, legal subtleties, problematic cases, procedure, laws . . . laws . . . laws . . . all the dry intolerable procession of man-made regulations from Solon's down. What were laws good for if they could not compel one little fair-haired girl to say 'Yes' to the man who loved her? How wicked Lydia had been with her one quick 'Yes' betraying him into his fierce and rapturous kiss and her interminable subsequent 'No's.' Ah, she was wicked, godless, soulless, a Belle Dame sans Merci . . .

'I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors death pale were they all.
They cried, "La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall."'

'One of the women who say "No" and have to be beaten. She should be beaten . . . beaten . . . beaten.' His heart struck against his side with the imagined blows . . . or were they kisses? . . . which he dealt her. She had no soul. She was not afraid of God. Well, then, he'd teach her to be afraid of him, JOHN. Women who would not fear God must fear Man. They made their choice. And *there* was a law for you!

Was she in love with Nicholas? Or with Stephen? Why hadn't he asked her? What a fool to forget to ask her that! He might have to kill Nicholas . . . or Stephen. What was the law about murder, if a man murders a thief?

Something seemed to come apart in Little John's head and he felt a hot trickle down his upper lip. He put up his hand quickly. Blood? His nose was bleeding. He sat down in the nearest shrouded chair, rested back his head and put his handkerchief to his nose. Gradually he felt relieved, calmer, better, and very much less murderous.

When Hooker from his drowsy perch announced very loudly but with a tentative intonation, 'I am a jealous God,' Little John burst out laughing. He laughed convulsively and for a long time while Hooker, somewhat alarmed, listened attentively, cocking his head from side to side and climbing anxiously about his cage.

'Thou shalt not steal,' he said, making an unusual effort.

'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'

Little John sprang up and went over to him.

'You filthy bird,' said Little John, looking sternly down at him from over his blood-stained handkerchief, 'some day I am certainly going to wring your neck.'

Hooker repeated low and pleadingly, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery,' and bit his foot with delicacy. His yellow eye caught Little John's severe gaze and held it.

'Why don't you say "Thou shalt do no murder"?' asked John.

Hooker made a short violent jump and clung to the side of the cage, chuckling, and John involuntarily flinched back. He was confusedly reminded of Lydia's accusation. 'She's right,' he thought, 'I am afraid of him . . .'

He thrust his finger abruptly into the cage and Hooker bit it to the bone. No more than Lydia was he accustomed to sudden familiarities.

'Ah,' said Joseph, entering from the study door, 'so you are saying good-bye to your poor old Hooker, are you, Johnnie?'

CHAPTER XII

NICHOLAS SURRENDERS

ALTHOUGH Angela's heart remained for some reason untouched by her brother's personality, she was very astute in her comprehension of him, the more so, perhaps, that her intuitive judgment was not distracted by his charm. She made no errors in her choice of maidens for his summer security and his hoped-for ultimate subjugation. During June and July, Nicholas had been exceedingly well entertained. This had not prevented his frequenting Lydia's garden, nor playing tennis with Stephen, Pepper, and young Paxton, nor his wafting about the country in his automobile a thrilled and laughing Hesther Anne: because Nicholas was an excessively active being whose weariness showed itself only in a taut increase of nervous energy. Besides, he was trying to forget the rubber factory until his necessary introduction to its duties in September and, in order to forget an Incubus, a young man's mind must be as incessantly occupied as a squirrel's body in one of these revolving wheels. It isn't possible to an ordinary observer to believe in the contentment of a squirrel thus artificially exercised. Nicholas's state of mind was certainly leagues from contentment . . . but he was neither brooding, it appeared, nor rebellious; he seemed calm, and his family were relieved from their acute apprehensions concerning him.

'Nicholas is going to settle down,' sang Caroline.

'Perhaps,' amended Angela and, withdrawing Katharine Stuyvesant early in August, she sent out to Rosewreath . . . Barbara Clay.

Her selection of Barbara was the result of rapid insight and of lucky chance. Angela had been in town for the day, and, happening to pause outside the window of a tiny bon-bon shop on Fifth Avenue, she caught a flashing glimpse of

Barbara Clay within, pointing out to a shopgirl one of the elaborately decorated objects in the window.

It was only a flashing glimpse, but just as the experienced angler, seeing a gray shadow follow another across the greenness of a pool, begins with fixed and glittering eye to fit together the delicate tool of his sport, so did Angela begin to labor deftly, choosing her fly and limbering her reel. Barbara was no easy catch, but neither was there any morsel in New York so likely to bring Nicholas, greedy, to the elaborate and formal board of matrimony.

Angela's eye had not only recognized the distinctive face and form which had been for several years known to New York society as Barbara Clay, but it had had time to approve of Barbara's clothes: she was wearing a narrow-brimmed sailor hat of rough straw beneath which her brown pompadour puffed out becomingly, a taffeta suit of shepherd's plaid, nipped in smartly at the waist, one of those new short skirts, just clear of her insteps, a lace blouse with a high-boned collar well up in points under the ears, a starched ruffle down the front and another falling over each gray-gloved hand, and a diamond swallow at the base of the collar where the frill began. The gored skirt seemed almost too severe, but was relieved into femininity by the wasp-like smallness of Barbara's waist. Very smart. And Barbara's figure was a dress-maker's dream, incapable of intruding the outlines of reality into the outlines of the ideal . . . a figure of one dimension as nearly as it may be found in a world of far too many dimensions. Angela considered all this: the face and figure, the dress, the Clay family, Barbara's record . . . she was twenty-five, of course, to Nicholas's twenty-two, but . . . Angela opened the shop door and stepped in.

'Why, Barbara, my dear, is that you? Aren't those pink butterfly boxes too adorable — ' (Everything wasn't merely 'amusing' in those days.) 'I might have known you'd get ahead of me. Are you awfully rushed? Have you time for a soda or an ice-cream? Huyler's? Isn't it blazing? Where are you in from?'

'Newport . . . Lenox just before. Tuxedo next . . . if I live to take the train.'

'You won't, if you don't give yourself a rest, Barb. You look *ghastly*.'

Barbara started visibly and turned her eyes to the nearest mirror. 'Ghastly' was too strong, but she looked tired and there were little lines . . .

'Goodness, Angela, you're depressing!'

'I'm frank to a fault,' said Angela, 'but I do care for my friends. You're not really going to Tuxedo in this weather?'

'U-hum . . . the Ruylers. What would you? The homeless must visit, mustn't they? Mamma has taken the three junior Clays abroad, you know. I'd love a rest, but quiet people never invite me to their quiet little homes. I'm supposed to help make the wheels go round. And I do. My real name is Three-in-One . . . you can use me on your motor or your sewing-machine . . . or your husband. How *is* Ripley?'

'In no need of Three-in-One, thanks, darling. Why don't you go up to Rosewreath for a week's rest cure and then descend upon Tuxedo with a *débutante's* rosy cheek and shining eyes?'

'I wish I could.' Barbara sighed and dropped down before her ice-cream with more limpness than she would have betrayed before Angela's frankness had diverted her eyes from butterfly bonbon boxes to a mirror. 'Where is Rosewreath, Angela? I thought your Long Island place was called "Ma Chérie."'

'So it is and it's no rest cure. But Rosewreath is Father's place up at Kaaterskill and it "sleeps amid its lawns." Father works all day and Mother —'

" . . . shaketh the dreamland tree? "

'Exactly. I can write to them that you want a rest and Mother likes nothing better than taking care of the weary. You'll have breakfast in bed . . . and what a breakfast! And you'll take a swim in the pool and a stroll in the garden and a nap in the hammock and then you'll go to bed. No one

will trouble you. You won't have to entertain any one . . . nobody there to entertain.'

Barbara was looking down at her plate and her eyelids lay like two small fringed fans against her pale cheeks. Perhaps she wasn't pretty enough, thought Angela. The eyes came up . . . But she couldn't be prettier!

'I'd love to, Angela. Really I would. Are you serious? Would your father and mother be bored to death? I'm spending to-night in town . . .'

'I'll send a telegram and I'll read you Mother's answer. She doesn't have to invite you, you know. She'll be honest.'

'You're sure? I won't have to be fascinating?'

'You can cut your hair short, brush it straight off your forehead, remove your corsets, take off your stockings and wear sandals, if you want to . . .'

Angela did not feel any of the weird pangs of the prophetess as she thus spoke.

Barbara laughed. 'That sounds convincing. They won't invite Kaaterskill young men?'

'There aren't any.'

'What a heavenly spot! Angela, you are well-named. I am terribly tired. My face feels twisted with being an agreeable guest-face, the sort of face that goes with a guest-room, you know . . . correct and uncomfortable . . . nothing opens or shuts easily. Your mother won't mind if I'm dull and get up late and go to bed early?'

'She'll love it.'

Caroline, in fact, wired that night. 'Delighted Barbara coming. Can rest. No entertaining planned.'

Barbara, when this was recited to her over the telephone, smiled deeply, thanked Angela, and set forth for Kaaterskill with two trunks, a hat-box, a dress-suit case, a tennis racquet, and a small black poodle. After her night's rest she did not really look so tired.

The one dignified occupation for humanity being contemplation, a silent waiting on the Lord, and such dignity being, it would appear, forbidden by the very circumstances of his

existence, to a partner in the Kaaterskill Rubber Factory, the Cedar Grove Park, and Signal Mountain Hotel Company, it seemed better to Nicholas, whose mind was more logical and pragmatic than his sister or his parents realized, to embrace the necessary indignities of normal human life with thoroughness. He was not given to compromise, sharing with the rest of his inspired, unlucky race the fatal longing for perfectibility. Whatever trails had worn themselves up to those mountain-tops of meditation must, therefore, be sternly blocked and planted out.

During the June and July of his novitiate into Worldliness, Nicholas had been very busy with such painful obstructionism. It was not long, for instance, before he discovered that Hesther Anne was only one of the trails. The man who dared to love her must, because of her sincerity and tenderness and starry fixity of faith, love her with the highest powers of his soul, and no sooner did Nicholas permit himself to lift his eyes up to the hills where this small earnest and gentle being had her dwelling-place than, by a bitter paradox, his soul rose instantly to its full stature, shot up strangely and ardently beyond the need of any Hesther Anne at all. Therefore, reasoned our pitiless logician, Hesther Anne, even were she not frightened by his earthiness — and under the froth and foam of his reputed wildness Nicholas knew that there was enough of dreggy residue to justify him in a conviction of earthiness — or by his spiritual pride which insisted upon a special and convincing revelation: even if it might be possible for her to forgive him these stains and this perversity, he could not allow himself the rapture of loving her. To love a woman for herself may be for the woman's happiness, but to love her because she is a roadhouse on the way to a man's especial idea of Heaven must necessarily be for her eventual misery. Hesther was a more than usually human and generous being. She would make only the necessary demands of love, but those demands, by some individual warping of his psychological get-up, Nicholas knew that he would never be capable of filling.

That Nicholas saw this so clearly shows that, in spite of physical activity, he had done a vast amount of painful thinking in the intervals of his midsummer flirtations and other squirrel-rotating. He had done a vast amount of feeling, too, under that smiling young bright-eyed mask of his.

His surrender of Hesther Anne, or rather his surrender of the possibility of allowing himself to love her . . . for he never dreamed with what noble company he shared her heart . . . cost him so much that it left him with a feeling of profound physical and spiritual lassitude. For the first time in his life he wanted to lounge and brood and sleep.

The departure of Katharine Stuyvesant gave him a day or two of respite for this self-indulgence. Unfortunately for his need it provided Caroline too with a long-desired opportunity. There was a reservoir of repressed maternal anxiety, tenderness, and disapprobation in Caroline for which she now found a quite unexpected release. It had been a long time since Nicholas had been left so entirely at her mercy. She would find him in a hammock with his hands under his head and a book lying face down across his chest, and, placing herself upright on the nearest and stiffest perch, she would give him her accounting, her expectations for his future, her disappointments in his past. A great many of Angela's reports and Ripley's tittle-tattle found their way to Nicholas's ears in this fashion, to his profound astonishment. At the end of her self-indulgence, Caroline, no matter how calmly and kindly she began, would be trembling with rage and with that unappeasable desire to slap Nicholas, while the young man himself looked either amused or so remote that he might for all expressiveness be a marble crusader on his tomb. He never explained or justified himself nor denied an accusation nor contradicted any of the damning evidence. Sometimes he laughed softly, sometimes he murmured 'Mother!' in the half-questioning, half-pleading tone of his childhood; only once he blushed violently and said 'Damn!' immediately thereafter begging Caroline's pardon.

Although she rather perversely enjoyed these interviews, Caroline welcomed the arrival of Barbara Clay.

Barbara reached Rosewreath shortly before noon and decided to take a dip in the pool before luncheon. For this purpose she donned her bathing-suit, draped herself in a thin cloak, opened her parasol and strolled across the lawns and through the shrubbery until she came to the marble pavilion, where she discarded her wrap and, perching herself on the broad balustrade, caught her knee in her hands and contemplated the swans. Let it not be supposed by the experienced reader that a 'swimming-pool scene' is imminent or that he will be better acquainted anatomically with Barbara. In her day the Annette Kellerman had been seen only in circus tanks. Barbara wore the latest thing in bathing-suits and the most daring. It was of heavy black taffeta, the skirt reached to the middle of her calf, and was trimmed with three nice rows of white silk braid, her legs were clad in opaque black silk stockings and her feet in bathing-shoes. The collar of this suit was buttoned up close to her chin, while it and the long sleeves were nattily finished with white muslin collar and cuffs. She wore a wide sun hat of straw tied under her chin, for Barbara had something which used to be known as 'a complexion.' Her clever face and big witty eyes which, though large and blue, resembled neither violets nor forget-me-nots and never could have brought visions of twin lakes or deep-sea water, looked charming under the brim of the hat and to a body of one dimension the taffeta suit was trimly becoming. Barbara, undisturbed by visions of a futurity of one-piece swimming-suits, studied her reflection between her dangling feet and then lifting her chin examined the descending lawns and gardens of Rosewreath. It wasn't a bad place, pity it had been built during the 'stuffy' period, a wonder that that nice red-faced Mr. Gregory hadn't indulged his wife in iron dogs. (There were two iron dogs banished to the woods by Angela!)

A large gray motor swept up out of the fringe of trees and made a wide curve, coming to a stop under the porte-cochère.

From it descended an active figure, its bare head glistening like brass under the sun. Barbara with no change in her expression watched it turn, after a brief parley with a man in livery, in her direction. Nicholas came towards her in meditative strides, with his yellow head down. 'He's scared to death of me,' said Barbara to herself. He stopped on the bank opposite her perch and called, waving his hand, which he pulled out of his pocket for the gesture,

'Hullo, Barb!'

'Hullo,' answered Barbara casually. To herself she added in a tone just too low to travel across to him, 'You've been trying to escape me now for two years, my golden lad, but you have been delivered into my hands.'

'I'll get into my bathing-suit,' was his innocent retort to this unheard communication; 'will you wait?'

'Certainly. But don't be long. We mustn't be late for lunch.'

He ran back to the house, and Barbara, resting her chin on her hand, smiled at the swans . . . who reminded her of Angela.

In ten minutes Nicholas joined her, his anatomy charmingly revealed.

'Are you really worn out, Barbara?' he asked, leaning beside her on the balustrade. 'Mother has just been telling me.'

'Not a bit. Your sister invalided me. She hadn't of course the remotest idea that I knew of your existence . . . far less that I had been its bane . . . and she told me that there were no young men at Rosewreath and that I would not have to be fascinating.'

'Angela forgets me . . . sometimes.'

'No. She remembers you. I knew there was something up when she told me that I looked ghastly and needed a rest. Angela has never cared for my fatigue before . . . and I didn't look ghastly. Just at first I couldn't catch her drift, then I remembered you and the rumor of your family's anxiety about your "wildness" . . . and the dawn broke for Bar-

bara.' (For her generation Barbara's line was astonishingly frank and ruthless, startling young men, more sensitive, out of their wits and into her hands.) She giggled. 'They think, since I am one of the Clays and came out respectably and have hidden my tracks with the most ingenious wariness ever since, that I am a good settler, like egg-shells in coffee. Would you agree to that, Nikko?'

Nicholas's eyes had rested tranquilly upon her during this revelation of Angela's tactics. At the end he smiled faintly and dropped his lids.

'Why did you come?' he asked. 'Last time we met you said you hated me and never wanted to see me again.'

'I came for my revenge, of course. Besides, I was rather curious to see your home and your people. Are you going into your father's business? What a pity you are not more like your father. Are you going to live in Kaaterskill?'

'Yes.'

'We are not throbbing with ambition, are we, Nicholas?'

'No. I wish we were.'

'Why are you such a useless animal?'

Nicholas jerked . . . and laughed. 'Do you think that, Barb, or is it part of the revenge?'

'I think it. I've come up here to analyze you. I want to find out the deep underlying flaw in your otherwise admirable character . . . the thing that makes a weakling out of you.' Again Nicholas jerked. It is never really pleasant to be called a weakling. 'And then having discovered it to remove it carefully with a pair of tweezers and thereby make a man of you. You're going to have a nasty experience, probing, vivisection. I want so much to be able to like you again, Nikko. Before you insulted me last winter . . .'

Nicholas drew his eyebrows together and gave her a quick bold look.

'Oh, I know,' she interpreted his silent gesture promptly, 'Pierrepont's champagne. But you did insult me. And your explanation did not explain. When a man deliberately snubs a woman, he should have something clearer to offer by way

of an excuse than . . . what was it? . . . "deliver my darling from the lions . . ." What did you mean by that queer speech?"

'Remember Pierrepont's champagne and don't be too exacting, Barbara.'

'But you had some idea. It was awfully hard on me, you know . . . the whole thing, for you'd given me all sorts of encouragement' — Barbara's ironical voice seemed to twist her flexible lips — 'and you drew back on the very brink . . . "standing with reluctant feet, where womanhood and girlhood meet . . ."'

'Barbara! Can't you understand? It was a compliment. You were "the darling" and I was the "lions" . . . don't you see?'

'Oh, I see.' She opened and shut her big eyes and laughed. 'What a hypocrite you are, Nicholas. I wasn't the darling at all. Your darling is always the same . . . that . . . conceit in you, that *crest* of yours that you simply won't bend down. Pride . . . pride . . . pride . . . and I don't know the springs it feeds on. I only know that for two years it has kept you from me and I hate it. I mean to break it if I can. Your loftiness . . . up till now . . . has had no use for me, but —'

'Yes,' he said slowly. He gave her a cold and troubled look. 'There's a use for you, but it's not a use I'd like to put you — or any other woman — to, if I can help it . . . if I can help it . . . a Black Mass. Come on, let's swim.'

And springing to the balustrade he sent himself through the air and cut the green deep water with his body. When he came up, sleek-haired, she let herself down beside him very gingerly. She could not wet the sun hat and she swam carefully with a small breast-stroke, bobbing rigidly up and down. She had on a pair of corsets and tight garters so that she could swim at all only with enormous difficulty; besides, her cuffs and collar were too tight. But the blood came up richly into her face, her eyes sparkled, and her amusing mouth made a button of itself. Her small lifted chin had a pretty firm line. She looked adorable in the water.

Nicholas lay on his back and stared at her. He was saying strange things to himself and he was trying at the same time not to think of Hesther Anne. If it came to the necessity for a Black Mass . . . if a man must deny God . . . he had better sign up definitely with Mammon. Nicholas was never for half measures. The rubber factory, the Making and Spending of a Fortune, the Marrying of Barbara Clay . . . a well-staked course and probably worth the running. A thoroughly well-occupied man — and Barbara's husband would at least be that — can forget the childlike beauty of the eyes of Hesther Anne, the loneliness of mountain-tops, the craving for a still small voice. If a man were going to surrender his soul to the super-activities of a marionette, he might as well go through all the gestures possible. Angela had a good deal of insight. She must have guessed that he was in need of a rescue from himself and that . . . Pursuer.

'You look like a little girl, too good for words in that hat, Barb,' he said as they climbed out.

'Depends upon the words,' said Barbara. 'Try me.'

She wrapped her cloak tightly about her dripping slenderness which contained all the possibilities of physical allurements and stood close beside him, looking up. There was much ability for the expression of want in that intelligent small-boned face with its big eyes . . . the face of a cat with a peculiarly developed appetite for cream. 'I dare you to snub me again,' she murmured, smiling.

Nicholas looked quickly about at the sleepy noon-scorched world, green and quivering with silent heat, and drew her into the marble pavilion, his lips bending to her mouth.

When she ran up across the lawns, her scarlet cheeks and bright eyes were exultant. But Nicholas left alone moved blindly forward until he stood with his hands tightened on the railing. Years before he had come upon Ripley Gaanse in this same columned building and had offered him a rescue. He was not remembering this occasion now nor the dewy coolness of that forgotten morning, but his own face, with

the green light of the water moving over it, was wan and blanched as though by the contemplation of a prison wall.

The Valley of Humiliation is especially deep for the Pilgrim who has descended from a mountain-top. As the week of Barbara's rest cure extended itself, her victory became apparent to the watching household. To Nicholas's twenty-two years of experience, she had her twenty-five, not one minute of which had been wasted in climbing up to remote and lonely altars. She was peculiarly gifted and had practiced indefatigably. Nicholas's defenses fell one by one with a terrifying completeness. Barbara would have none of his cool sweet smiling, she preferred to see his lips tighten or quiver: she didn't enjoy the brilliance of his eyes unless their serenity were sharpened to something more personal and more expressive. She hated the sweetness of his temper and tormented it as near to a breaking as it could possibly be stretched. Having given up the possibility of loving Hesther Anne, he was left with a rush of thwarted and repressed emotion which now sought easier channels. Barbara's lips were warm and massy and alive; once tasted, they obsessed his imagination. Having by a few laughing days of generosity sufficiently enslaved his senses, she kept him in a humiliating attitude of beggary . . . like her poodle with a lump of sugar on his nose. A sugar lump is so easily upset by any undue exhibition of enthusiasm. She renamed this animal Nikko during her visit, because to watch her put him through his tricks, punishing him for failure, rewarding him at a long last, made excellent and pointed discipline for the young man's pride. Barbara under innocent-appearing sidelong lids, loved to watch his face. Nicholas's eyes were abject in their angry self-consciousness. His cheeks burned in two hot bars just under his lids. It was becoming.

She gave him feverish nights and ugly shameful dawns when the sun was a reproach. He had never suffered such abasements. Discipline came to him with a peculiar intensity, and when he received his brief and poisoned rewards, all

that was left of his pride writhed at the shamelessness of gratitude and of submission.

Caroline was delighted. He really seemed like other young men, moody, ardent, vulnerable. She would find him sulking or flinging himself about and muttering to himself. She would find him quarreling with Barbara or suspect him of a tingling cheek, rebuked for some impertinence. For the first time in his life he was rude and irritable to his mother, but that did not hurt Caroline as his serenity had hurt her. No, it delighted her. The cause was just what she had always wished for Nicholas . . . whom Martin would never punish and whom she could never subdue. Splendid. Beneficial. Humanizing. That her son was possessed by a visible devil did not distress her, for that was a necessary part of his experience. During a whipping any healthy spoiled boy will howl and rage and kick and threaten. 'Barbara has Nicholas just where she wants him,' the triumphant woman wrote to Angela, 'and he's getting the thrashing of his life. My dear, it would do your soul good. The poor boy couldn't eat a mouthful of dinner last night, and he follows her about like a starved dog. Nicholas . . . ! Can you picture it? She's marvelous. He'll be married to her before he knows what has happened to him and, if I understand Barbara, she'll keep his nose just where it belongs, against the grindstone. He'll never get his head up into those queer dreadful clouds again. It's splendid, splendid. Nicholas will really turn out right. This is the woman for him. She is charming and clever and not a bit impressed by his Nicholas-ness, not afraid of him the way girls usually are when they adore him. Angela, I do congratulate you. I feel sorry for the poor boy now, but he will be grateful to us in the end. The Clays have money, haven't they? Position certainly. I am very happy . . . happy about Nicholas for the first time in my life. He is a darling when he's cross, and so handsome. I've never seen him look so beautiful . . . vivid, and like other people. Martin likes Barbara too . . . She is so pretty and agreeable.'

At the end of that August, Barbara left at last for Tuxedo

and Nicholas, looking like a ghost, saw her off at the station. She had refused his offer of marriage for the third time and her going seemed to cut his body like a knife. As the train started, she leaned out of her window and he ran along the platform beside her, looking up.

'I think I will marry you, Nicholas, after all,' she said, 'but don't come near me for a month, if you want me, because I'm bored to death with you just now. Look out, child, don't get run over . . . Nicholas! Oh, my God!'

He escaped by a sort of miracle from being pulled under the wheels and his lips swept hers. He dropped down, ran forward a few steps, and fell.

'You G—— d—— fool!' yelled a conductor frantically, 'you deserve to be killed . . .' This voice sawed through the roaring passage of the train which showered Nicholas's prostrate body with cinders and hot dust.

The triumphant lover picked himself up, brushed the soot and gravel from his clothes. He had twisted his leg and limped back to the station platform and his car.

When he married her . . . when he married her . . . He smiled a tight-lipped smile and sent his motor at a furious illegal speed up towards the town. If this was love, it had been highly flattered in epithet . . . an ugly searing hot-hearted emotion. Marriage with Barbara would be very much like a Black Mass truly . . .

That evening after dinner, with the thirst of a wounded man for clear water, he went down to call on Hesther Anne.

CHAPTER XIII

COOL WATER

HESTHER was sitting idle with her head in her hands on the narrow step of her kitchen door when Nicholas reached her. There was no lamp in that alley, but the moon stood straight above her head and painted her dress white and her face as she lifted it quickly to him. He saw her little teeth flash and her eyes shine and knew that she was smiling.

'You look as if you had melted down to a mere spot like a burnt-out candle,' he said, seating himself beside her.

'It's been so hot. I'm glad August is over.'

Nicholas bestowed a silent curse upon his selfishness. For all the weeks of this August he had been sweeping Barbara along the shadiest and highest roads, swimming with her in cool water, and lounging wherever the breeze could find them. Here down in Creek Kaaterskill there was no possibility of breeze for any one and the creek water was fouled by his father's factory, and there were no automobiles to lift a little wilted being up on the windy wings of speed. The odors of the squat dark houses and yards accumulated heavily by day and sultry night until their inhabitants seemed to lie poisoned at the bottom of a fetid tank.

'Hesther, your father must get another house.' Nicholas's wrath turned against Julius.

'Yes. He is going to move very soon. We went to see . . . that house you told us about. Miss Devinney has been coming to The Room very regularly all summer. She is . . . converted . . . that is, she is very happy now, and, and . . .' Nicholas wondered again why any mention of the Devinney woman always caused Hesther Anne such embarrassment. 'She is going to take Papa and me into her house. We're to have the second floor to ourselves and a little sitting-room downstairs. She will cook for us.'

'Thank the Lord! Then you can have a rest. When do you move away from . . . *this?*'

Hesther looked softly into his face. 'I've been happy here, you know, Nicholas. I haven't minded. It's been exciting, funny. And now that I've started my Day Nursery . . .'

'You've really got it started?' He had meant to help her.

'Yes. Mr. Murphy gave me his upstairs room and the factory mothers are beginning to leave their babies. They pay just a few cents a day, enough for the bread and milk, and people have given and lent me cots. I used most of our old bed-linen. Papa wants me to and we don't need much of it here. Of course I need money . . . No, Nicholas, not yours. I have a scheme. I'm going to write up my Kaaterskill experiences.'

'As if you had time or strength to write up anything! If you live through your precious experience you'll be doing very well. Listen to me a minute, Hetty-Anne.'

'I'm listening.'

How softly she said it, with how much tenderness! During his month of intensive emotional training he had forgotten that there was such a quality as tenderness. Barbara's voice was a persuasive instrument enough, but never in those two keys: it had a thrilling flexibility, but it was neither soft nor tender. For a moment Nicholas lost the thread of his intended speech and sat staring at Hesther Anne seeing between her whiteness and himself an image of the big-eyed taunting tempting face of his mistress . . . What would Hesther Anne do or say if he should . . . ? He pulled up his thoughts sharply and spoke with a businesslike crispness . . . the manner of Martin Gregory's partner.

'This is the end of August, isn't it? Next month I'm going into the factory with Father, start work September fifth and on that date I begin to draw my pay. I'll be independent. Very well. Now, I have a scheme of my own . . . not philanthropic, even Father admits that it's good business, so you needn't ruffle up your crest . . .' The expression reminded him again of Barbara. She had kept her word mag-

nificantly as to the humbling of his crest. Would he ever again get it up from the dust beneath her heel? What was he trying to say to Hesther? Oh, yes . . . 'I've always thought that Father made a bad break in turning Mr. Hunt out of Saint Matthew's . . .'

'He didn't turn him out, Nicholas. I've told you a hundred times that . . .'

'Don't lose your temper, Hesther . . . in letting him turn himself out, then, and making bad blood with the Creek element. Father's felt the effects in the factory, I assure you. Your father's preaching has done him more than a little harm . . . the spirit isn't as good as it used to be . . . there's a lot of grouching and grumbling and slacking . . .'

'I'm sorry.'

'It serves him right. I told him so. What he ought to have done and what I, as a partner in these magnificent enterprises, am going to do, is to found a chapel down here. It needn't necessarily be denominational, need it? It can be any sort of a chapel or meeting-house your father chooses. He can be his own boss. But he'll have a decent place to conduct services in and he can have a small cottage of his own . . . by way of rectory, and I see no reason why his congregation shouldn't do something towards parish support and I'll see that the rubber factory turns out some kind of salary.'

Hesther Anne laughed, then quickly, for apology, laid her hand on Nicholas's.

'I'm afraid that would be a very difficult sort of parish to arrange, Nicholas, even if Father would want to do it . . .'

'He's got to want it. He would have wanted a Mission Chapel in the first place, wouldn't he?'

'Oh, yes, that's what he prayed for. But now, it's too late. He has quarreled with the Bishop, you . . .'

'Father and I will pay a call upon the Bishop . . .'

' . . . and he's . . . well, like one of those mediæval monks, Father's in love with poverty and simplicity. He wouldn't like now to go back to pulpit-preaching and pew-praying and

to an organ and an altar and — a salary. I'm afraid he really wouldn't . . . now.'

She was struggling against tears, the impulse to laughter having changed when she touched his hand. A fortnight ago Nicholas would have put his arm about her, but now he sat stiffly.

'We'll see,' he said. 'Don't cry about it. How tired you must be! I think he'll come round. I can talk it over with him . . . perhaps I can work it so that the suggestion seems to come from him . . .'

'Oh, if you could do that!' Hesther had hastily swallowed down her tears. That half-irritable 'How tired you must be!' from Nicholas had been like a blow to her sensitiveness. She pushed back her hair in the old way and tried to study his face by moonlight. It looked very sharp and thin. Yes, it was changed.

'What have you been doing all these weeks, Nicholas? Have you been away?'

For perhaps two minutes Nicholas did not answer her question. She felt him stiffen and harden physically as though he had tightened all his muscles to endure some pain.

'N-no. I've been at home. We've had . . . company. Hesther, I am a low animal. I am truly.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because since I was here I've learned a lot about myself . . . and life. I am what the books call a "sadder and a wiser man." I've had a — oh, a barrel of conceit taken out of me . . .'

'What are you talking about? Nobody would . . .'

'Somebody has. I've got my deserts. I've been a top-loftical donkey and now I'm crawling along close to the earth with my mouth full of dust.' He added, laughing, 'Perfumed dust.'

'I can't imagine what you're talking about, Nicholas. You're very irritating when you're cryptic.'

'I'm in love,' said Nicholas. 'At least I suppose I am. Is that cryptic?'

Hesther sat breathlessly still.

'Oh,' she said. The moon seemed to come down and hit her head like a big white stone. She clung to the edge of the step with both her hands.

'I've been told so,' Nicholas went on, 'and I seem to believe it . . . Will you come up to the hill where I've left my motor and go for a long ride with me to-night? Maybe all night long until morning? Will you, Hesther? I won't "tell you all about it." I won't talk at all, but we can pretend we aren't on this damnable earth, but in some beautiful other planet where . . . you . . . and . . . I . . . ' He stopped, his voice breaking.

'Doesn't she love you?' whispered Hesther Anne.

'She says she thinks she will marry me. I am not to come near her for a month because at present she is bored to death with me.'

'Does she love you, Nicholas?'

'No. Damn her!' He bent his head forward and gripped his temples in his hands. Hesther heard his teeth slide against each other. 'But she means to have me.'

Hesther found the moonlight very cold. 'You don't love her . . . I don't want to go riding with you to-night,' she said.

'I don't blame you. I'd better go.'

He stood up and she tried to rise, but found her legs were weak and shaking, so she sat still and reached up to him her hand.

Nicholas did not take it. He stood looking down at it.

'This is all part of the Rubber Factory and the Cedar Grove Pleasure Park and the Signal Mountain Hotel Company,' he said, 'and it all goes together and fits in very well like the parts of one of these picture puzzles every one's so dippy about. I've got just an inkling now of what life looks like . . . real life, you know, Hesther, as a man must live it nowadays. No, of course you don't know . . . ! The reason I'm not taking your hand for good-night is because you once told me that you walked with your hand in — God's . . . '

'Oh, Nicholas, Nicholas, what are you trying to tell me? Dear . . . I can't stand it. You — you do hurt me. Are you sick? . . . Nicholas . . . have you been *drinking?*'

'No. Of course I haven't. I've lost my sense of humor temporarily. They say you do when you're in love. Besides, my spirit's broken. Her name is . . . Barbara . . . Good-bye, Hesther Anne. I'll come down very soon and talk over my scheme with your father. Good-bye . . . good-bye, Hesther Anne.'

'Good-bye, Nicholas.'

She had drawn back her hand and had caught it in the other. Nicholas went away, as she bent down her head.

It was almost bedtime . . . she could say her hymn here . . . now . . .

'Keep me, oh, keep me, King of kings,
Under the shadow . . .'

'Under the shadow' . . . yes, that was it . . . 'The *shadow* of Thy wings . . .'

CHAPTER XIV

SUBSTANCE AND SHADOW

NICHOLAS, prey to an incomprehensible feeling of remorse, went swiftly along the alley, around its corner, and attacked the cobbled hill which led up from Creek Kaaterskill to its more reputable parent Kaaterskill itself. The moon was broad on the ascending way and made it look like a cascade of shadow-wrinkled little waves. As though wading down it, another young man came towards Nicholas. There was something familiar in the approaching figure, uncannily and uncomfortably familiar . . . the shape of its head, the way it held its shoulders. Nicholas had a very strange feeling of terror as though he were about to meet an apparition. He was not given time to analyze this absurd sensation, because the young man, darkly and roughly dressed, a factory-hand probably, passing very close to him, thrust out his chin and spoke.

'You —— ——,' he said through his teeth, 'get to hell out of here.'

Nicholas, being preoccupied by the small puzzle of this familiar aspect that was unfamiliar enough to cause the psychological effect of fear, was so profoundly astonished that, without opening his lips for a question or a retort, he stopped and turned and stared. After the muttered insult, the stranger, if he was one, went immediately on straight down the street until he came to the entrance of Hesther Anne's alley into which he moved. As he disappeared, Nicholas came to life like a bundle of tightened springs, whirled and ran after him, tingling with belated rage and a thirst for vengeance. Reaching the corner, he saw his accoster enter Hesther's kitchen door and heard him calling, 'Hesther! Oh, Hesther . . . Hesther Anne!'

Nicholas unclenched his fist and, after a moment's hesita-

tion, went slowly back as far as the alley corner where in the doorway of a deserted shanty he stood, lighted a cigarette, and waited for Hesther's visitor to reëmerge into the street.

Now, thought Nicholas, where and how during the active and sociable twenty-three years of his existence had he incurred the enmity of a man he did not really recognize at all? It would be absurd to fancy that his father's unpopularity with some aggrieved factory-hand would have brought such a curse upon his own innocent head: and yet, hadn't his mother warned him, entreating him to keep away from Creek Kaaterskill where the feeling 'ran very high' and where it would be dangerous for him to walk about alone 'in his white flannels'? Nicholas looked down at the livery of peril and smiled. It wasn't his white flannels that had inspired that 'Get to hell out of here.' There had been a hissing snake of personal hatred, of envious malice in the fellow's voice. And Nicholas felt sure that the speaker had at some time been known to him. He wished he had looked more intelligently at the face, he had been distracted by that resemblance. Shutting his eyes now he studied this impression carefully and almost immediately the reason for that uncanny little thrill occurred to him. The young man in outline had been a double of himself . . . a trifle shorter, perhaps, a good deal heavier, but . . . Nicholas with his head in the air and his shoulders straightened to the look of self-containment and of detachment, which Barbara, teaching him the truth about himself and prettily imitating his 'swagger,' had shrewdly named 'conceit.' Under any name, this very look sat on the person of his recent encounter and it was uncanny enough to meet it walking in the moonlight and to have its owner swear at him and forbid him the freedom of Creek Kaaterskill and to see him go in with it at Hesther's door like a familiar and call to her softly in that deep, not-to-be-mistaken lover's voice, 'Hesther! Oh, Hesther . . . Hesther Anne!'

Nicholas was conscious of a tingling sensation. His pride

of the Dog in the Manger was alarmed for Hesther Anne. He saw new danger and humiliations for the daughter of Julius.

He had plenty of time, however, to digest these tinglings. It was past midnight when the young working-man stepped out from the Hunts' kitchen door and, evidently in better humor, strolled whistling melodiously up the alley.

Nicholas threw away his last cigarette, moved out, and touched him.

'I've been waiting for you,' he said.

The moon had left the alley, but, as they moved instinctively out into the wider street, its light shone raw from the edge of the hilltop on the grimly startled face of Nicholas's enemy, and, recognizing it, his hand dropped and his voice changed.

'Tom Devinney!' he said.

'Sure. Didn't you recognize me, Nicholas?'

'No. I wouldn't be likely to . . . with the sort of greeting you gave me. In the old days . . .'

Tom snorted, then stood with a surly droop to his body, moving about in his pockets small objects with a rattle like nails or rivets. He looked up presently from under his heavy eyebrows at Nicholas so that the younger man was reminded of the buffalo in the dining-room at Rosewreath. The vision of the buffalo brought, as a necessary accompaniment, a vision of his father, red and warm, dining heartily beneath it, and Nicholas then realized that, strong as was the silhouette likeness between himself and Tom Devinney, it was not nearly so strong as another resemblance. The broad body, the ruddiness, the thick wide mouth, the big teeth . . . Bittering eyebrows, Bittering teeth, the unmistakable physical attributes of his father's mother's people, a people so earthy and so vigorous that they seemed to reproduce their kind in the effortless manner of rows of vegetables exactly and quite pleasantly identical. Nicholas had seen whole ranks of them at family gatherings . . . sturdy, surly in defeat, cordially expansive in prosperity. It occurred to him now that if

Martin Gregory had failed in his Rubber Enterprise, he would have worn perpetually the baffled, sullen, bitter air of Tom Devinney.

'Well,' he began again, answering Tom's snort, 'what have I done? What's the matter with you? I'd have looked you up, but some one, I think it was Flaherty, told me you'd left Gissing's.'

'So I did. Lost my job. Back.'

'Was that my fault?' Nicholas demanded with a short, half-puzzled, half-indignant laugh.

Tom did not answer, he seemed to be marshaling his thoughts rather painfully for a convincing parade. Instinctively the two men moved slowly on together, Nicholas in white, slim and attentive and suspenseful, half a step ahead of Tom, who, dark and heavy, seemed like the other's shadow at his heels. The resemblance was very noticeable as they moved . . . the resemblance quite of substance and shadow when, by some trick of light, the shadow is the solidier fellow of the two.

Tom threw up his head.

'Look a-here,' he said abruptly.

Nicholas stopped instantly and turned his face, blanched by moonlight.

'Let's have it out to-night,' Tom went on doggedly. 'The whole thing, shall we?'

'Certainly. What is it . . . the whole thing?'

Tom made an angry gesture with his right arm and his eyes sparkled ruddily at Nicholas. 'Well, to begin with . . . why don't you cut out all that high-and-mightiness and talk straight stuff, eh? Quit the bluffing.'

'Honestly, Tom, I don't know what you mean.'

'You're the only human then, man, woman, child, and dog, that ain't on to me here in Kaaterskill. Hesther Anne always said you didn't know, but I couldn't swallow that. You seemed to me a well-witted chap enough.'

Nicholas waited, hoping for enlightenment, his clear eyes betraying suspense, and just a shadowy beginning of fear.

When he saw that Tom meant to leave the next move to him he made a visible effort.

'Tell me, will you, Tom? It's something Miss Hunt knows?'

'I call her Hesther Anne . . . same as you do. I've known her just as long.'

'I beg your pardon . . . Hesther knows?'

'Sure. Every one knows. Kaaterskill and Gissing's and the county. Your mother knows all right. I guess it was her that got the Gregorys to run me out of the Kaaterskill High School . . .'

Nicholas looked startled.

' . . . Your mother wouldn't stand for her precious boy gettin' his nose bloodied by Tom Devinney . . . the Gissing's brat . . .'

A vivid memory leapt upon Nicholas from his childhood.

He saw his father's face sullen and masked, its eyes in flight; he saw Joseph Gregory's offended nostrils; he saw his mother running from the table, rattling the beaded portières, her napkin to her face . . . 'That's what you get for sending your children to a horrid vulgar public school where they meet nameless riff-raff of the county, little brats from the street, the scourings of a town like Gissing's, dressmaker's bas —' and on top of the incomprehensible monosyllable crushed by his father's sudden shout of 'Hush!' trod belatedly the ghost of Little John's soft innocent question, 'I thought motherses was always missuses, Aunt Caroline?' . . .

Tom was still speaking . . . Nicholas had missed something . . . but no word of Tom's could have put his truth more vividly for him into Nicholas's understanding. ' . . . So it's always seemed to me your folks hev owed me something . . . a start . . . a hand up. I wouldn't have asked for more than that. Mother has had money from . . . from *him* . . . a sort of bribe, I call it, to keep me down, out of your sight, Nicholas . . . under. I tried for a job in your factory and a green foreman give me one. That was three years ago . . . because I've got a way with machinery. I like it. I was

satisfied with that. I ain't askin' more than a start, a fair start. But I'd been going for a month, drawing my pay and going fine . . . when orders come from higher up . . . I was to be fired. That's that. "The boss don't want you here. Get out. March." Well, since then, things have gone wrong with me one way or another. I'm always on the outs. Rowing . . . that's my trouble. I guess I'm soured and that's the truth of it. It would have been a long sight better for me if I'd never known. Mother had ought to hev got out. But she had a sort of pride about it. She wasn't going to be moved on by any Gregory, see? She'd face it out here where she was raised. She's been straight . . . a good one . . . cared for me and nothin' else much since . . . *he* got married. Oh, she was his woman all right before . . . but . . . ! Your father's bastard . . . that's what. And there ain't a roadside cur in the county that don't see the truth. I thought you sort of liked to pretend you'd never heard about it . . . liked to bluff it out. That made me sore. See? You getting everything I've lacked . . . the name, the business, the chance. Oh, I don't say you hadn't the real claim to it . . . it's none of it mine by right, but . . . it's hard to look on and see you get it just the same. And now . . . ' his voice, breathless with the effort it cost him to explain himself, stopped as though it had been choked by a sudden hand.

'Now . . . what?' Nicholas prompted softly.

'And now . . . it's . . . goin' to be . . . Hesther Anne.

Nicholas, with half a smothered word, unintelligible even to himself, for he did not know what he was trying to express, turned hastily away. He shook off Tom's hand which fell detainingly upon him.

'Let me go, Tom. I've got to get home . . . I'm . . . sick.'

'Say . . . honestly, Nicholas, didn't you know?'

Nicholas shook his head, looked painfully at Tom, and sprang away up the wide steep lane with an almost panic swiftness. One would have fancied, watching the furtive motion of his body, that shame and fear were both hot at his heels.

In fact a grim race with such pursuers lay ahead of Nicholas and he ran it all the next dark day: a day of wan September storm in which the rain seemed to be trying to wash the colors off the surface of the world and to be in a fair way of succeeding. It was neither safe nor pleasant weather for rapid motor-riding, but Nicholas flung himself down behind his wheel before breakfast and let the unprotesting slave carry him and his incubus 'through brake, through briar,' like Puck at his maddest, splashing mud all over the impeccable genie and himself. Nicholas was angry, a sort of cold rage with Tom, with his father, with himself, and with life, had followed the scorch of his first shame. Curiously, Tom's illegitimacy had stamped a bar sinister across Nicholas's spirit, seemed to have got into his own blood. He shared that sense of apartness, of social stigma in an intimate fashion which made him indeed brother to Tom's bitterness.

Stiff and chilled and saturated, he lunched at a far-away New England inn, smoked and brooded, brooded and smoked for an hour or two, pacing the dripping veranda of the sad little clapboard house under drenched elms . . . a place which always remained in his memory, detached and vaguely mysterious like somewhere visited in sorrowful dreams. He came there to various decisions and drove himself wearily back to Kaaterskill in the face of a sudden western glare of released sun, which set sky and tree, field and river ablaze with viridescent copper and blue flames, a light unearthly and incredible.

He was back in New York State and crossing the mountain road above his native town when he overtook Stephen Hands returning from an afternoon's tramp outside of Kaaterskill. Nicholas slowed down to greet him.

'Hullo, Bugs. Get in.'

Pepper's tutor, buttoned up to the chin in a raincoat and looking stern and distinguished in his pince-nez and tweed cap, stepped in obediently.

'I'm not sorry,' he said, sticking out his long muddy legs and looking shrewdly at Nicholas across his large rain-

sprinkled nose, 'to be relieved from this awful fetish of Exercise. I was just coming to the conclusion that it was a form of dissipation, self-indulgence. You walk two miles a day and get a certain kick out of it . . . then after a time in order to get the same kick you have to increase your dose to four miles a day. Soon that brings only the gentle glow of a spinsterly stroll and you are driven to a ten-mile tramp. At that rate, you see, the confirmed roué of seventy years accustomed to his daily ramble would be forced to walk every day one hundred and four —'

'Shut up, Stephen! Look at that sunset. We're losing most of it down here between the road-banks. Come with me a minute and I'll show you the world before it has time to shed its wings and get them all ink-draggled with night.'

While he spoke, Nicholas was out of the car and up amongst the drenched bushes of the mountain undergrowth, followed unprotestingly by his friend who, having crossed a grass-grown clearing, the ridgy remains of a vegetable garden, and passed a picturesque oaken-bucket well, joined him on the doorstep of a deserted little farmhouse. Here, indeed, they overlooked the world.

It was a sudden tiptoe introduction to beauty, bringing the heart up almost painfully. Stephen set his grim young mouth and rubbed the rain from his glasses while he tried to hold in his vision the heraldic splendors of the sky and the variegated prisms of a washed and fiery world, through which the river bent from north to south, a keen silver scimitar. His eyes, not equal to distance, however, the valley appeared to him a smeared artist's palette, but, turning towards Nicholas near at hand, they caught the tremulous working of his white face and the desperate rapture in his eyes.

'Laugh . . . not to cry, old man,' said Stephen quickly.

Nicholas swore and turned away.

'It's just as fine over here,' he said, 'from the other side of the house, a running surf of hills and it's pretty nice looking up the mountain through all those silver birch trees.'

'I wonder,' said Stephen when, after a brief excursion,

Nicholas was beside him again, 'what insane recluse first fancied he could farm these stony acres. He did grow vegetables.'

'Yes. And flowers. And he kept bees. There's a row of beehives back here and a cowshed. There's an old barn too. The cart's still there. I know who owned it . . . a nice old apple-faced fellow with an eye for hills. And I know who owns it now.'

'Some one with a very limited knowledge of the properties of soil, I wager.'

'Yes,' said Nicholas . . . 'Me.'

Stephen, who had cleaned and resumed his glasses, glittered them at Nicholas.

'You? You poor imbecile! Why?'

'I wanted it for — a retreat.'

'*Wanted?*'

'Yes. I've no use for it now. I've given up . . . retreating.'

'Glad to hear it. There's a good deal of the coward in both you young Gregorys. You have a great fear of reality. Little John takes it out in hanging to the skirts of his father's social and moral coat-tails while you exalt it for your pride's sake into a still hunt for that easy glorification of Man . . . dignified by the name of Go —'

Nicholas here gripped his friend's arm so urgently and so painfully, looking him at the same time so wickedly in the face, that Stephen swallowed his word and winced.

'What the devil? Do you want to fight me, Nicholas?'

'If I could,' said Nicholas in a tone that matched the fierce white convulsion of his countenance, 'I'd take you for that by the throat and fling you down off this mountain till you lay below there . . . dead.' And he let go of the startled young man and fled from him back towards the car.

But Stephen without any hesitation pursued him, caught up with him and, turning him forcibly about, planted a hard-fisted blow which sent him flying back amongst the blueberry bushes, where, as nearly as their stiff branches would allow him, he measured his length upon the ground.

He got up, laughing.

'I wasn't in the least angry,' said Stephen, 'but you were crying for it, my son. I'll fight you if it will make you any happier.'

'It won't,' laughed Nicholas with a catch in his breath; and added incomprehensibly, 'I wish I'd seen more of you this summer.'

'I'm glad you like me in my more informal moods,' said Stephen grimly and readjusting his glasses. 'A great deal of forcibly restrained irritation with Master Pepper Fane went into that blow with which I felled you, Nicholas, and I should find real pleasure and benefit from repeating the experiment at intervals.'

'No. I don't like being knocked about. I hate it. But after nearly breaking your arm and threatening your life, something was justly due me. I — I have been alone all day ...'

'I *thought* you seemed glad to see me,' said Stephen dryly. 'Sometimes it's a great relief to meet a friend . . . in moments of nervous tension.'

'Honestly, I'm sorry, Stephen. I apologize.'

'Quite all right. Did you say something about wishing you'd seen more of me this summer?'

Nicholas blushed. They were again in the front seat of the car and he was busy with the gears. Stephen was secretly relieved to see youth and good-humor returning to that face for which he had a tenderness so profound and pitiful that he was driven to repressing and ignoring it.

'I've been busy all August entertaining . . . visitors.'

'U-hum. I've seen them. In fact, I met them one day. They were very pretty, I thought, and exceedingly able. They were shopping with your mother at Watkins's dry-goods store . . . ribbons, I think they were buying . . . and they had on lilac dresses and carried their pet poodles under their arms. I think the ribbons were for the poodles.'

'I didn't know you had met Barbara.'

'Yes. Your mother was so startled at finding me grown up

and provided with a clean pocket-handkerchief — by one of life's strange coincidences I was blowing my nose when she saw me — that she was betrayed into introducing me to Miss Clay and into inviting me to dinner.'

Nicholas looked intensely amused.

'I wish I'd seen Mother. I've always wanted to be there when you first redawned upon her view. Mother did hate you so, and now she would so love you.'

Stephen instinctively creased a trouser-leg, damp and covered with burrs. 'She does so love me. She asked me to dinner. Miss Clay, however, was not so favorably impressed. I told her a sad unbeautiful truth about the poodle . . . what was his name . . . Nikko?'

'No. Punch.' Nicholas's face, colored by the sunset, produced a deep glow of its own.

'Well . . . I thought she called him Nikko. Anyway, I told her he had symptoms of the mange and was overfed, all stomach. So she didn't love me. She gave me a great deep cold look . . . ugh!'

'Won't you come to dinner to-night?' Nicholas pleaded as the nearness to Rosewreath drew the color and the mirth out of his face. 'Please do, Steve. You don't have to go back this evening, do you?'

'No. It's my evening out. Probably the Fanes would love to have a meal without me. Privacy must have its charms. Pepper being what the English in their dainty way would call a "filthy feeder," it would rest me not to watch him at the pleasures of the table . . . Rabelaisian, in a way, interesting . . . contemporary ancestors . . . So . . . I accept with pleasure your kind invitation, my motives being the usual ones usually omitted in acceptances. I'm sure you have a good cook. The Fanes' food is delicious for one week, excellent for two, exasperating for three . . . and nauseous thereafter. Italian . . . olive oil and red peppers, tomato sauces.'

'Don't you like them, Stephen?'

'Red peppers?'

'No. The Fanes.'

Stephen was silent for several moments, the sardonic twist faded from his face. 'I was never so happy before in my life,' he said jerkily. 'Probably I'll never be so happy again . . . Stop for a second, will you, Nicholas, at the corner of Maple Lane, and let me change my clothes. I want to tell Lydia I'm dining with the Martin Gregorys. She'll be pleased, I think. She imagines you neglect me . . . a very amusing girl, that . . . Lydia.'

CHAPTER XV

TRAPPED

AT half-past five in the afternoon, when that same incredible conflagration of the western sky had brought an incredulous Caroline out to the terrace of Rosewreath, a gray limousine came sweeping up from the wet and emerald trees about the lawn and, pausing near the terrace edge, neatly disgorged Angela and her husband. Angela in a gray topcoat and a veiled hat flew towards her mother with less of nonchalance and of distinguished languor than had characterized her greetings for many years and almost in the fashion of her curl-bobbing childhood embraced the astonished little woman with congratulatory cries.

'Isn't it simply too wonderful? I can't believe it myself.'

'Great news . . . all right,' assented Ripley, who likewise advanced from the limousine and, with a faint warming of his chill wide face, stood loyally behind his wife, supporting her enthusiasm with all the solid reserve of the Trevor-Gaanse temperament.

'Angey, darling, what is it? It's so nice to see you. I must tell James. Wait. We'll have tea out here now that the rain's stopped and it's so beautiful. We have such splendid sunsets at Rosewreath, so glad you and Ripley aren't missing this one.'

Caroline was inclined to appropriate to Rosewreath all the more favorable and impressive natural phenomena.

'But, Mother, you're so calm! I thought you'd be dancing and singing "Ta-ra-ra-ra-boom-de-ay."'

'My dear!' Caroline blushed under the expressionless gaze of the gray Gaanse eye. 'I don't know what you and Ripley are so enthusiastic about. Your father didn't read the market quotations to me this morning. But I dare say you'd like some tea.'

Caroline had gone to the house and rung the bell and had

come out again while Angela and her husband were exchanging glances of surprise.

'It's just like Nicholas,' said Angela.

She placed herself in a green iron terrace chair and Ripley unwillingly, for he thought the chair damp and the terrace an uncongenial place for tea . . . he hated eating out of doors . . . followed her example.

Caroline came brightly back, sat down between them and looked with her air of an inquisitive and hungry bird, from one to the other.

'What is the great news, dear?'

'Where's Nicholas?' counter-questioned Angela, which brought the ladder quickly to Caroline's forehead.

'Oh, Nicholas? He went out before breakfast in his car in a dreadful downpour and isn't back yet. I've been so anxious all day. It's so inconsiderate and, well . . . not like other people. Nobody else does such terribly unreasonable things.'

Angela laughed indulgently, stripping off her gloves and pinching the pink tips of her long smooth fingers. 'You'll have to forgive him this time, Mother, won't she, Ripley? Nicholas's days of terribly unreasonable doings are numbered. His queerness will be deftly taken out of him in the course of the next few years, won't it, Ripley?'

'Sure thing.' Ripley grinned as though the prospect of something being taken out of Nicholas pleased him in a fashion faintly sinister. 'That little woman . . .'

'Oh,' Caroline sighed and leaned back from the erect position of inquiry to the more relaxed attitude of disappointment. 'You're thinking of Barbara. But I'm afraid, Angela . . .'

Angela caught up her voice in a sort of crow. 'But, you dear sweet old idiot, it's done, it's settled. She's got him. They're engaged!'

Caroline's face turned scarlet to the tawny gray of her little smooth pompadour, and then white to the high black collar of her gown.

'Barbara wired me to meet her for lunch in the city to-day on her way to Tuxedo, and she told me she had accepted Nicholas. He'd asked her three times, and just as she was leaving she said "Yes." She's as happy as can be and has cabled to her mother who, she says, will be ever so pleased. So there you are, Mother dear . . . rejoice!'

But Caroline showed no signs of dancing or of singing 'Ta-ra-ra-ra-boom-de-ay' or any other song of triumph. She sat quite still in her stiff iron chair and remained extremely pale.

Nicholas was going to marry Barbara Clay. Her Nicholas was going to marry Barbara Clay. Her dear little round-faced yellow-haired baby boy was going to marry Barbara Clay. Her precious little slender bright-eyed Nicholas . . .

She took out from between the hooks of her tight blouse a tiny clean square of muslin and blew her nose which turned red in her white face. The man came out with the tea and Caroline began with busy little pouncings to prepare the cups and the kettle.

'Mother . . . aren't you pleased?'

'Oh, yes . . . yes . . . you take two lumps, don't you, Ripley? . . . strong . . . and cream. I always remember people's teas . . .'

. . . Her beautiful tall Nicholas, mysterious and detached, always so patient under her everlasting criticism, was going to marry Barbara Clay . . .

Caroline rose abruptly.

'Excuse me just a minute, Angey. I'll be back at once. I see that Martha . . . Martha has forgotten . . .'

She went almost running into the glass doors of the sun-parlor and her small compact body disappeared.

'And what do you make of that?' gasped Angela. 'I thought she'd be in a seventh heaven.'

'She's gone in for a quiet little cry,' sneered Ripley. 'Darned cold out here, Angela. This weather, after all that heat, gets me, rather. Let's have tea inside.'

Caroline went up to her bedroom, closed the door, and

fitting herself snugly into the corner of her great lounge she cried indeed, heartily and with the spasmodic sobbings made necessary by high tight corsets. Then, quite suddenly, it occurred to her that her very dearest hopes had been realized and her most hounding fears had been destroyed, and with that she was up from the sofa corner, tripping to and fro across the room, dabbing cologne on her forehead and powder on her nose and ready indeed to dance and sing and to embrace Angela and Martin.

Nicholas was saved. Naughty, perverse, maddening Nicholas was saved. Salt had been successfully put on the wag-tail of his spirit. It was snared. He would never be a FREAK, or a FAILURE. He would remain a partner in the rubber factory and carry on the successful labors of Martin and herself. He would be a credit to her — even more of a credit, perhaps, than Angela. Nicholas! Nicholas! Oh, how happy she was, how triumphant, happier than ever before in her life, even than when on that triumphant wedding-day she knew that a Simpson was to become for life a Gregory. She must telephone dear old Martin. She must get him home early from the office. They must invite Joseph. They must have champagne. James would have to run down to market again. A good dinner. Roast duck . . . apple-sauce . . . a celebration. Dear Nicholas! Darling Nicholas! Sweet, pretty, clever little Nicholas . . . so good at last . . . as good as Sarah Hands's boy, Little John. Safe . . . safe . . . safe, her own darling now for unconditioned and unbridled tenderness.

There is something almost indecent in the triumphs of maternal ambition. Caroline in that bedroom let herself go as though she had still been a Simpson and a village girl. But when she came down, she was rearranged for Ripley's inspection and was able to take tea in the parlor — hardly in her excitement noticing the perambulation of her entertainment — with sufficient composure and just the right amount of enthusiasm to reassure Angela as to her happiness.

Even while she talked, however, with a spasmodic

irrelevancy, her eyes were waiting, and no sooner was Martin's step audible near the front door than out she ran from her tea-table to greet him.

Martin wore almost a furtive air and his face was pale. He looked rather like a man summoned home by illness or disaster.

'Is it really true?' he whispered, bending his head down for her kiss. 'No mistake about it, Carrie? Nicholas, engaged?'

She gave him a series of bright little nods, trying with her excited eyes to rout by a campaign of briskly repeated assaults the strange lack of enthusiasm in his own.

'Angela and Ripley are in there, Mart.'

'Let's go upstairs first then, Carrie. I'd rather see you alone, get hold of things a little . . . Engaged to Miss Clay . . .'

Up in their bedroom he went methodically, with a dazed automatism, about his usual ablutions, jerking out questions above the splashing of his neighborly bath, and listening to Caroline's high-pitched pæans of delight, of congratulation, of anticipation. By the time Martin emerged in shirt and trousers, rough and wet-haired as a dog, she had married Nicholas — and the Clays had done well by their daughter in the matters of flowers and guests and 'breakfast' — and there had been born a little grandson with curly Bittering hair. Martin's face, however, under its rough thatch, still wore a wistful and bewildered look.

'Seems queer to me somehow . . . can't get it through my head. He never said a word last night after she left, and he didn't look just right. I don't like her springing it on Angey and her mother that way.'

Carrie, already in spirit a grandmother, rushed to the defense of that curly-haired grandson's mother.

'You ought to be glad she felt like that about it . . . proud and sure of Nicholas's love. Nicholas had asked her to marry him three times . . .'

'That's twice too often, Carrie. What did she want to tease him so for? She made his life a regular hell for him

while she was here. I could see that. I shouldn't wonder if she went on doing it afterward. Oh, I know, Carrie . . . you needn't shake your shoulders at me. I know she's one of the Clays . . . whatever that may mean . . . and there's a little money and some position . . . she'll bring her share of value . . . and she's all right, pretty, a clever puss in her own line, but I can't help wishing — though I wouldn't for my life say it to Angey and I know darn well you'll take my head off — I can't help wishing that it was going to be . . . Hesther Anne.'

Caroline repeated the name incredulously with spurning lips. Then she said in the tone of a mother worn down by unavailing argument to a blank repetition of reproach, 'You told me you liked Barbara.'

Martin went over to his shaving-stand, a tall slender piece of furniture, a mahogany box on a telescopic pole, supporting a round mirror which now held a portrait of his wide red face tilted up to show the two busy hands and the thick neck, round which a high starched collar had to be adjusted.

'I do like her, but' — he struggled with his collar-button — 'but she isn't the kind of girl Gregory men marry. They like soft homely little women.'

'You can't say Sarah Hands was a soft homely little woman.'

'Not little . . . but she was, under that air of hers, soft enough. Look at Little John . . . ain't he the image of her, Carrie? Sarah was one of the kind I mean. I wasn't thinking of physical littleness. Barbara is a mosquito . . . and by homely I don't mean ugly, either. You were as pretty as a Christmas card with your yellow hair. Nicholas is too young to marry . . . to settle down.'

'But that's what we all want him to do,' wailed Caroline, 'to settle down.'

'Too soon . . . and this won't be a settler. I mean . . . it's hell to sow your wild oats that way.'

'I don't understand.'

'No, you're too good a woman. But look here, Carrie, if I'd married at twenty-two . . . three . . . you know darned well, I'd have married for worse, old girl, and for a different impulse than it was when I got you to throw discretion to the winds and marry the bad lot I used to be.'

'Nicholas,' said Caroline with a dry sort of tenderness towards the bad lot Martin had been, 'is not like you.'

'Yes, he is . . . sort of . . . more than you know. Dash this button! Lend me a hand, Carrie, will you? I can't see any necessity for a stiff shirt and tails just because we've got Angey and Rip and Jo for dinner. I feel . . .' He waited until Caroline standing on tiptoe had mastered the button, when he sat down in his white shirt sleeves and broadcloth trousers on the edge of her lounge and looked up at her. By his posture, by his scattered hair, and by the look in his eyes she was vividly reminded of an occasion when she had stood above him in the bedroom of the little Maple Lane house and had tried to persuade him to whip Nicholas. 'I feel, Carrie,' he said gropingly in that uncomfortably remembered tone of helplessness, half-tender, half-ashamed, 'I feel that somehow amongst us we'd trapped old Nicholas.'

'Trapped him? Why would he ask a girl three times to marry him if he didn't want her to say yes? You're just out-and-out silly, Martin. I've no patience with you.'

'He was after her bait, all right. Pity she is the sort that has to be approached with offers of marriage . . .' He muttered this and Caroline either didn't hear or decided to pretend not to hear. 'Oh, well! I dare say you're right.'

'If we've trapped him, as you say, Martin, by having an attractive suitable girl in the house . . . it's certainly for his own good.'

'Perhaps. You always set yourselves, you and Angey, to manage Nicholas . . . for his own good . . . to conquer him. I warned you not to. Don't blame me.'

'You *know* it's for his happiness to marry, young, a nice girl whom he loves, Martin. I wouldn't be doing anything against his happiness, would I?' She was ready to cry. 'You

know you've been worried sick about Nicholas. He's been so foolish, headstrong . . . so wild.'

Martin bent his head and looked down at his big hands turning against each other with a baffled and uncertain motion.

'U-hum. Yes. He's been all of that, I guess. I have worried . . . some . . . not so much as you imagine, Carrie. I wonder what it means, anyway, that sort of wildness . . . when you're twenty? With me . . . I don't know . . . there was something not so ugly about it. Liquor, women . . . well, sometimes they're ugly enough in themselves and in their effects . . . but just the same when a twenty-year-old goes after them . . . it's a case of wishing to crush all the excitement and the — the beauty out of everything, to lay hold of it quick . . . before it's too late. To get things into your possession. That was it. After I'd got after the rubber factory and had you to back me up, I forgot about it, but I used to be as restless as a witch . . . when I thought of it all . . . the world outside and away . . . so big and queer . . . with its water, free, always moving . . . against queer lands, the tropic winds . . . you know you read about 'em . . . scented. Women . . . white and brown and black, waiting under great big blue moons on white beaches . . . waiting for a man . . . Same sort of thing sends men out exploring, climbing mountains that no man ever climbed before . . .'

(Here he looked up with the coarse and merry Bittering slyness.) 'I always suspect 'em of a secret preference for difficult virgins . . . and crossing dangerous oceans and going up poisonous rivers, getting themselves into trouble generally . . . restless. I used to be, am still now, Carrie, more often than you know. There's no harbor for a man's sailing-ship and that's the truth . . . not until the wind stops blowing. And Nicholas' . . . his eyes sought, puzzled . . . 'Nicholas . . . I don't know . . . I thought he'd be the last to anchor down . . . *that way.*'

'I don't understand.' Caroline's voice sounded thin after the muddled and blurred sound of Martin's revelation. She

looked angry and perplexed, had put up the ladder on her forehead. Sometimes Martin kept her listening to talk like this, as if he'd been drinking, staring straight through her too as though she hadn't been a good wife to him and worked for his schemes and helped him to his success, yes, and forgiven him things that other women might not have overlooked: that speech about 'difficult virgins' for instance, low, disgusting . . . 'What are you talking about? All that stuff about sails . . . and beaches . . . It sounds like a child. Certainly you wouldn't want a man to take an interest in negresses and Chinese women? You'd hate it as much as any one if Nicholas began to run after low women. You sound as if you were sorry to see him married to a lady, settled, respectable, safe . . .'

'Settled . . . safe . . .' Martin looked up at her, coming slowly back from his distance-gazing. Far away in his red-brown eyes struggled something that reminded her of Nicholas's boyhood and queerly . . . of wings . . . Nicholas had said something, putting his naughty sweet face close to hers so that his curls tickled her neck and staring starrily into her eyes . . . 'You haven't got wings in there like Dad's . . .' He must once have seen that beating, struggling light. Martin had never shown it to her before. 'Settled . . . safe . . .' How queerly he repeated those exorcising words. Was it possible that he had sympathized all these years with Nicholas's queerness, encouraged it? No, surely . . . not when all the while he was building up his business for the boy.

'You want him in your office, don't you, Martin?'

Ah, how swiftly his eyes changed. That was his Shibboleth.

'Sure. Yes. You're right, Carrie. Always are. Business . . . and . . . marriage. Best thing in the world for him.' He stood up briskly. 'I'm a damn fool. But when your only son goes ahead and springs something like this on you, it stirs you up . . . things I had forgotten. Barbara's all right, I guess. I'll take your word and Angey's for it. We'll get out a bottle of father's champagne and drink her health.'

They were in the act of drinking Barbara's health when Nicholas and Stephen came in upon them at the dinner table. The celebrators had been forewarned of Nicholas's belated arrival and now stood in their places, bright-eyed and broadly smiling, singing in unison, both deep and shrill, Joseph moving his long thin hand.

'Here's to you, Barb'ra Clay!
Here's to you, our jovial friend . . .
And we'll drink before this God-forsaken company,
We'll drink with all our heart . . .
Here's to you, Barb'ra Clay!'

Nicholas stopped there just within the threshold, Stephen's glasses shining above his shoulder, and flung up his head to listen.

Caroline was sharply watching him. When Angela, throwing down one of the big embroidered table-napkins, ran forward, caught him by his coat, and kissed him with a shrill, 'Congratulations, Nicholas. My dear little old brother, I do wish you joy . . . Barbara told me to-day . . .' Caroline was still sharply watching. What was it Martin had said? 'Trapped'? Nicholas, white-faced, his eyes turning from left to right, brilliant, astonished, *queer* . . . he did look trapped.

Well, it was for his own good, wasn't it? She hardened her spirit against him and smiled proudly, holding up her glass.

CHAPTER XVI

A CONDITION

JOSEPH, after tendering his formal and faintly envious wishes for Nicholas's happiness — he couldn't help but feel that Martin's son had stolen a march on Little John by marrying in his twenties the right sort of girl, good family, substantial backing, and all the rest of it — took his leave early in the sad aristocratic Gregory fashion so admired by Caroline, and, thereafter, Ripley, Stephen, Angela, and her mother undertook a game of whist in the Chinese room.

Martin and Nicholas were left in the great somber parlor alone. They fled at once to Martin's home study, a room lined with glass-enclosed bookcases whose shelves were half filled by Martin's share of the Gregory library, the dullest and most uniform-appearing volumes in the world, by Caroline's youthful favorites, by Angela's Charlotte Yonge and Edna Lyall, the other half, like a jester's costume, being gaudy with the backs of 'modern' novels. Nicholas kept his own books in his rooms upstairs . . . and read them. There were no other real readers in the family, although Angela, her formal education finished, skimmed weekly literary reviews so that she could talk knowingly of the new books to the new authors . . . and their critics.

Here, having turned on the lights, for this room was rarely used after dark and had been neglected by the Active Ants, Martin set out on a central table-desk his whiskey-and-soda and tobacco. Nicholas lighted his pipe, sat down, stood up, moved about, smoking fiercely and biting on the stem, while Martin remained deep and solid in a leather-covered chair, patting its arms with his square red hands, took his cigar in and out, and talked.

Nicholas, wherever he moved or stood, could see those familiar hands. He loved them. They had been, for such

rough and heavy hands, extraordinarily tender and magnanimous. This blunt-fingered man had treated him always with a delicacy of silent comprehension, an unspoken trust. Curious, thought Nicholas, how much there was in his memory capable of being touched by those hands. He could feel the thick forefingers in the grip of his two fists, when Martin gave him horseback rides on his knees . . . with a splendid action-story . . . 'Here we go slowly clop-clop down the drive . . . here we begin to trot clopity-clop . . . here we cross the bridge, easy now, there's a railroad just beyond, clop-clop, clop-clop . . . THERE COMES THE TRAIN! Whoa, Nelly . . .' and the final glorious gallop, Nicholas shouting and clinging with all his force, his delighted eyes of fear fastened on his father's eyes, until in magnificent catastrophe Nelly threw him once for all on the hearth-rug. The same hands . . . teaching him how to shoot his marbles, their owner down on the gravel path beside him, hunkying like another boy, the big strong fingers folded instructively about his own . . . those long index fingers again held up in front of him, 'See my two fingers? Well, now shut your eyes . . .' the fingers placed on his lids, and in the dark, that weird tap on the back of his head, followed by 'Open now, here are still my two fingers and . . . who hit you?' It was years before, seeing the trick played on Angela, he realized that quick substitution of a middle finger, freeing the left hand for its mysterious assaults.

'We'll build you and Barbara a house on the other hill, Nicholas,' Martin was saying. 'I don't hold with young people living with their parents. It's a rough kind of time at first. Ever watch a team of freshly broken colts? Lots of kicking and plunging and harness-breaking, likely . . . Better got through with privately, you know, no outside comments and no witnesses to bring up the foolish speeches later. A sharp word or a quarrel gets an adventitious sort of reality, lasts longer, if it's set down with comments in another person's memory. People live about half of their lives emotionally swayed and colored by the opinions and

reflections of other people. It's done plenty of harm to married lives. My mother's father lived with my parents . . . old Bittering fellow, always speaking his mind, proud that he didn't "mince matters." It was hard on father and mother. He'd keep tab on 'em and dish up speeches to each other which they'd have been glad to forget. No dogs were allowed to sleep with Grandpa Bittering to poke 'em in the ribs. Lord, the whippings that old fellow got me. He never saw through Jo. Well, I guess Jo was a better boy than me. I'll try to be a better grandpa than that Bittering chap was, Nicholas.' Nicholas managed a smile. 'Another thing . . .' Here the cigar was pulled out for a prolonged inspection. Nicholas, standing against the mantel, nervously fingered his pipe and kept his eyes down. They persistently avoided Martin's gaze, Martin trying dumbly with an equal persistence to capture them.

'I told you I'd start you in with a salary of eight thousand dollars a year, didn't I?'

'Yes . . . and it's more than enough.'

'Not for you and Barbara, my boy. Barbara and I had our little confidential talks and I found out among other things what the modern New York girl spends on her clothes. Barbara, it seems, uses French models . . . Worth creations, I think they call 'em . . .'

'Look here, Father, any couple with a house ready built for them . . .'

'And furnished,' put in Martin. 'I won't do it by halves.'

'*And* furnished . . . that can't live on eight thousand a year ought to stay single. It's nonsense, Father. Barbara may wear a Worth creation now and then, but she doesn't eat her daily bread in Worth creations, and, anyway, until I really earn a larger salary, I can't be — pauperized. That's what it amounts to. Barbara has to begin with me where I begin. It's only fair. When you got married . . .'

'Ah! Those were different times. We didn't pay cooks twenty dollars a month in those days, Nicholas. And

Carrie . . . she came out of a little village home where she and her mother washed the dishes and made up the beds . . . and their own clothes. Besides, if a son had to start at the bottom of his father's ladder, the world wouldn't be climbing very fast, would it?'

'But eight thousand a year given out to a greenhorn like me can't be called the bottom of any ladder. It's a fortune. I could have a yacht. How long was it before you made eight thousand a year?'

'All a matter of proportion, Nicholas. As a junior partner in the concern —'

Nicholas moved abruptly, set down his pipe on the marble mantel, and turned with tight lips upon his father.

Martin faltered. 'We-ell?' he asked and without any inkling of Nicholas's intention, he had acquired suspense.

'There's something, Father . . .' The young man's eyes were lowered and it was this absence of the cool brave shining look which so dismayed his father.

Martin pushed back his chair and straightened in it sharply, his heavy eyebrows coming tightly together on top of his blunt nose.

'Ah!' he said, breathing out his words. 'I *guessed* it! You don't want to marry this girl.'

Nicholas turned scarlet. 'That's not it.' He spoke very low in a voice of youthful wretchedness. 'It's . . . it's . . . I feel like a cur . . . when you're so generous . . . but . . . before I agree to come in with you . . .'

Martin abruptly and with alarming vehemence threw his cigar into the empty fireplace. His face reddened and there came the ruddy sparkle of sudden anger to his eyes.

'Before . . . you . . . agree? You're pretty well signed up now, aren't you, young man?'

Nicholas turned away from him, walked across the room and back, his father screwing his body round to keep him in view during this discursion. When Nicholas stopped, he stood in profile within touch of his father's hand, his own hands deep in the pockets of his dress-suit, his head down.

He looked surly and desperate, almost Bittering in spite of the Gregory elegance of his tall figure. Martin found him unfamiliar.

'I've got to make a condition,' he jerked out doggedly.

Martin leaned back. 'O-oh,' he drawled, and the sound had the slow after-drag of a fallen lash, 'a condition? What are we after now? He doesn't want more than a furnished house and eight thousand a year, but he has to make a . . . condition, eh?'

Nicholas spoke hurriedly, looking down at the brass andirons which gave him a coarsened and broadened image of his own shrinking face.

'It's only . . . that you take . . . Tom Devinney into the factory, Father . . . give him a good job . . . I mean . . .'

The silence he expected came. He heard the slow collapse of his father's angrily rigid body in the chair. Nicholas's heart beat terribly hard. There was more in his misery than shame and remorse, sorrow for his father's humiliation, hatred of his own hard intrusion into the secret soreness of a soul . . . there was suspense. He had made his condition because the injustice to Tom Devinney rankled in his blood, because he could not bear either that the little world of Kaaterskill and Gissing's should condemn his father and himself for cowards and shirkers, nor that he himself should know them to be such fugitive souls, but deep within his consciousness, hidden where he could not quite lay the explanatory finger of self-analysis, there burned a spark of hope. If his father should refuse the condition, if he then were released from the rubber factory, if he had no immediate prospects . . . if . . . the chain that held him to The World were snapped . . . All of this preoccupation that reached his consciousness was a sudden memory that as they came into this room, through a dark unshuttered window, he had seen a mountain-top against the stars . . . Orion was sloping up . . . a blazing web of necromancy . . . He must see it again. He turned slowly towards the window. The light on the table had put out Orion, the pane held only a

reflection of the room. Unwillingly Nicholas's shrinking eyes came down to Martin.

His father sat in a huddle, his head hanging, his face pale. The beloved strong square hands had fallen together on his lap. Easy to read the attitude. By this dear son he had been shamed. The glory of his fatherhood had left him. He was old.

'Yes . . . Of course,' he said brokenly and looking up. His eyes were dim with humiliation. 'Yes . . . You're quite right . . . I'll put him in . . .'

Nicholas's heart dropped. Never so much in his life had he wanted to fall down and cry with his head against his father's breast. He moved forward slowly. As he passed the chair, Martin reached up a blind beseeching hand.

'Nicholas . . . old man . . . you don't . . . ? You won't . . . ?'

It was a prayer for his respect.

Nicholas caught the hand in both of his and set it fiercely to his lips.

'No, Father . . . Of course not. I've been . . . You've never . . . with me . . .'

He turned and went out, plunged unseeingly through the big front room and across the tessellated hall and fled noiselessly up the great dark staircase to his room.

There he turned down his lights, flung open his shutters, and leaned out. Orion was up. The spaces he rode across were beautifully laid out for him in points of shattered light. It was surcease for a mind in pain to see the invisible fixed lines from star to star, exact, unvaried, geometric, vast. From Betelgeuse to Riga, a million million miles of night . . . and so they moved unchangingly across a million centuries of nights. To sit down tranquilly . . . like a shepherd on a hill, justified in a busy world by one's quietness, and watch the recurrence of such calm impersonal majesties . . . ! 'Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their lines have gone out . . .' Their lines . . . David had felt it too . . . that charmed regular fixity. What held them there shining upon one another in a

distant reasonable ecstasy? The answer must lie, if anywhere, within, where lay also the incomprehensible comprehension by a tormented atom of those unattainable, unimaginable ecstatic distances . . .

Barbara . . . Tom Devinney . . . his father . . . Barbara . . . atoms, violent, unhappy, angry atoms, spinning and charging, always in contact, and out of it, bruising, personal, undignified, like his own tears. His father's little shame, his own little condemnation, so cruel, so like a malignant insect's sting, Tom's little soreness, his mother's little buzzing triumph over him, Barbara's little, little lure . . . so small, so restless, all of them, under the sloping progress of Orion.

The old cold happiness lifted his spirit up and out of reach. So might a man ride upon a holy quest, washed, absolved, cooled from human love and sorrow . . .

CHAPTER XVII

AN OLD, OLD DEBT

'YOUR mail this morning, Mr. Hands,' Pepper Fane announced as Stephen joined him at the breakfast table, 'is . . . two ladies, a gent, and a bill.'

Stephen murmured, 'We don't do it in the Guards, my son,' as he settled himself, spreading out his napkin and squinting down at the envelopes beside his plate. His glasses hung by a cord and, being perpetually necessary, were always being pursued by his big dextrous fingers.

'*You* needn't quote Ouida to me,' Pepper mumbled through a crowded medium of toast and cereal, 'because it isn't your line. You don't belong to that period. Bertie Cecil, alias Mr. T. S. Hands: gender male, mental condition peculiar, period modern scientific, chivalry nil, religion doubtful.'

Stephen fitted on his glasses and looked at Pepper a minute, then smiled. Pepper flushed.

'Fresh,' he whispered, evidently analyzing his own attitude, 'fresh and looney,' and he cracked his egg.

Mr. Fane breakfasted in his upstairs writing-room and Mrs. Fane and Lydia were usually half an hour later than the two youths. Stephen, having finished his grapefruit at leisure, opened the top letter of his mail. The letter head was:

CHESTER BURR, SHADOW LANE
WATACONIC, NEW JERSEY

MY DEAR STEPHEN [it ran in an eager handwriting, sloping and blurred, not easy to decipher], You have always been one of my three boys, Nicholas and Little John and you. I've liked to call you mine, though I'm afraid you have been the one least aware of my adoption. But I know, through Nicholas, that you have the quality of magnanimity well developed, so I'm very earnestly and humbly asking you

to come out this next Sunday to see me at my little old Wataconic house. It isn't a bad trip, only an hour from New York, and my Chestnut Burr is just across from the station. You'll see an enormous chestnut tree and under it . . . am I.

This is more important to me, dear Stephen, than I have made it sound, really vitally important, so if by any chance you can't possibly get to me next Sunday, do please come the first day thereafter you can manage it . . . not later than Wednesday. You may say, 'Dern that bothersome old spinster,' if you like . . . but come.

Your cousin

SALLY HANDS

Pepper no doubt made his own deductions, for Stephen's face was deeply flushed, like a lover's. He telegraphed his acceptance and on Sunday morning early he set out for Wataconic.

Sally's chestnut tree was visible from the train window before the Wataconic station came in sight: one of those conical towers of green which seem built for the dower of centuries of shade, a mazy sanctuary for shy birds, a deep-rooted, warm-hearted, well-sapped veteran tree, sober with rustling memory and generous with sunny anticipations. Sally's tiny old house stood beside it, as dwarfed by the tree as its little mistress's body was by her great heart. The highroad ran by her windows, sheltered from it only by a row of red and yellow chrysanthemums and rainbow asters, and by a little clean picket fence. Stephen opened the gate, stepped across a flat stone, and knocked. It was a white door with a fanlight above and a narrow pane on either side. These were daintily curtained in white net like the other windows of the house above and below.

Sally opened the door.

'Bless you,' she said and, standing on tiptoe, she put both her arms around his neck.

Stephen's glasses fell off as he kissed her. He had not Little John's native ease in the matter of kisses.

How little changed she was by all these resolute swift years! He remembered the very feel of her shoulder when

she had forced him to put down his head and listen to her stories by the Gregorys' fire . . . in the same fireplace before which Pepper now lounged over his books. His memory for some reason skipped their rare intermediate intercourse. He felt that to-day linked itself with those first days when he had learned from her the trick of loving.

Sally always had a great deal to say for herself, warm, un-instructive woman's chatter. Using it, she took him up and down little steps all over her house which seemed much bigger inside than the chestnut tree gave it a chance to look outside.

'It's one of the oldest houses in New Jersey, I believe. An ancient Hands cousin left it to me. There were a great lot of old Hands people, Stephen, aunts and great-aunts and cousins . . . so few of them married . . . poor souls! It's been the most unmarrying race. Your father . . . against the wishes of his clan for some reason . . . and Little John's poor mother were the only courageous ones. I've sometimes thought maybe we knew that we weren't strong enough vessels for any very vigorous wine of living.'

'My father was strong enough, wasn't he?' said Stephen. 'He got blown up in a chemical laboratory. He asked just one question too many . . . poor chap!'

Sally, a little breathless from talking so fast and coming upstairs, showed him a row of miniatures against her bedroom wall. 'One of them is your father as a little boy. Isn't he sweet? . . . such an inquiring little face. Do *you* still ask questions, Stephen? "Why?" and "How?" and "What?"'

'I don't ask 'em nowadays,' he said; 'I *am* them.'

She put her little warm heavy hand on his arm and looked up. He saw a drawn pallor on her face and a deep tranquil sadness in her eyes . . . an Indian summer look. What great blue good eyes they were under her funny swirl of faded yellow hair. The lines in her face were few and fine and sharp, done with a silver needle-point, two or three laughter-made about the eyes and two or three, pain-fashioned, about the lips. Her throat was wrapped in gray tulle, cloudy and

faintly sweet . . . violets, Stephen's big accurate nose informed him. She had always been a sweet little person, Sally, dainty without being really very neat or even slightly prim.

They had lunch together, served by a big clean old woman whose slightest word and look was visible or audible devotion to her mistress. Sally smiled up at her a dozen times during the meal and explained to her Stephen's sardonic flashes of humor.

'He's a funny boy, isn't he, Mary?'

'Yes, Miss Sally,' Mary agreed, nodding her head with a certain austerity as though 'funniness' were to her a synonym for masculine wildness as, in a way, it is, for women, even the wildest, are rarely funny unless they learn the trick from wildish men. Sally and Mary, Stephen imagined, though exceedingly cheerful and ready to be amused, were never very 'funny' when they were alone.

Lunch was good, incredibly good: little hot fluffy dishes that were merely the essence of savor and things with crispy edges, white curled lettuce and creamy mayonnaise, old, old sherry wine.

After lunch, Stephen was sent out under the chestnut tree to smoke, Sally excusing herself, he fancied, rather abruptly. He even thought as he stepped out of the long French window that Mary ran to her with a subdued cry, but when he looked back they had both left the room.

An hour later, Sally came slowly out to the bench and table where he sat. The afternoon was soft, filled with the smoke of burning leaves and with the dimness of autumnal mist. Sally was very pale, even to her lips, but she waved gayly as she came up and sat down with her little brisk sociable air of pleasantness.

'And now,' she said, 'Stephen, I must overcome my great fault of — of procrastination. I feel so cruel to you, my dear,' she put her hand quickly upon his where it lay on the table. 'You have had a pleasant time so far, haven't you? Not exciting, but enjoyable?'

'Yes. You know, Cousin Sally,' Stephen squinted at her and twisted his mouth, 'you were my first love. I was elated when you sent for me.'

'Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Why didn't I do it oftener?' She shook her head, her eyes filling. They were so very blue under tears, the blue of childhood. 'How stupid I've been, a lifelong blunderer. But now, Stephen, I really must tell you why I sent for you. I might have had Nicholas, but, you know, for all his sweetness . . . and I quite worship him . . . he's rather remote, a little alarming to me. I don't know at all what goes on in his mind or heart or even, sometimes, if he really has one . . .'

'Oh, he has one, all right, Cousin Sally.'

'Yes, I'm sure you know it. And I might have sent for Little John, but oh, my dear, I just couldn't bear to frighten him. That sweet old *tender* look of his. He's so young and he loves me. He always puts his head against me now just as if he were really Little John. He couldn't bear it . . . yet.'

'Cousin Sally,' cried Stephen, and drew himself together, 'you're going to tell me . . . ?'

'Yes . . . a sad sort of thing, but not really so dreadful . . . not to me . . . and it won't be to you because you have a fine hardihood, Stephen . . . I've admired it so. You are not afraid of truths, you love them, even the hard ones, better than pleasant lies. And then, though I was your first love, we've never been together much and what happens to me won't be so personal, will it? I haven't very long to live . . . a month perhaps . . . and I have something on my conscience, Stephen.'

Stephen put on his glasses and then let them drop and in his set face the handsome near-sighted amber eyes strained as though here there was something they could see better without the powerful lenses.

'Tell me about it, please, Cousin Sally . . . if you want to. I'm . . . proud.'

'I did so hope you would take it this way. It's such a help to me, dear. I am rather alone and inclined to be emotional,

I think. It is rather a horrid illness . . .’ She named it with a soft reluctance.

Stephen repeated the word soundlessly and, setting his elbow on the table, shaded his face a little with his hand.

‘Go on,’ he said between his teeth. ‘What a damnable world!’

‘Oh, no. It won’t be long and everything is going to be done for me. I’m going to a hospital next week. I don’t want any one to see me again . . . after this. I want them to remember me . . . the other two boys . . . as I was at graduation time. They were sweet to me. We were all so gay. They . . . the doctors tell me I shan’t have much pain . . . not with the morphine. But I’ve put it off as long as possible and they say a drug changes you . . . not that it matters . . . for such a short time. I’m not really a bit afraid.’ She laughed naturally and softly, ‘It’s almost . . . funny . . . how calm and cheerful I’ve felt about it.’

‘How long have you known?’

‘About two months. If I had been examined sooner . . . but perhaps it’s better as it is. Operations are hideous and not a bit certain. That’s enough about the horrid illness part of it, Stephen.’

‘Oh, Cousin Sally, why should it be . . . *you*, so awfully kind, never hurting . . . ?’

‘That’s just why I sent for you. I did a dreadful thing to *you* once. I’m somehow sure that you haven’t forgotten it.’

Stephen’s face flamed. The color of embarrassment or of emotion was so rare to that steady face of his that it changed it into a boy’s face instantly.

‘You couldn’t remember that . . . No. But, if it’s what I think . . . I haven’t forgotten.’ He looked up dimly at her from under his hand. ‘You see, I was in love with you, Cousin Sally . . . I called you Sally to myself . . . really in love.’

‘And to this little lover of mine that you were, I said . . . “I thought you a disgusting little object and couldn’t bear to touch you” . . . and you heard it and hid your poor little wounded self for hours . . .’

Stephen's face burned deeper as though the speech cut his manhood with the full shrewdness of his childish wound.

'I — I went out and tried to hang myself in the woods,' he said.

She drew in her breath.

'I did really. I was in love with you . . . But it was the best thing that ever happened to me, Sally. I *was* a disgusting . . .'

'Stop . . . stop . . . Oh, my poor little lonely sensitive queer boy . . . how could I have said it, or felt it? You've grown up so attractive, Stephen, so . . . so handsome . . .'

'Thanks, Sally. I wish I thought so. However, owing to you, I've made the best of a bad job.'

'I've never forgiven myself. I've been ashamed ever since. The wickedest thing in the world, the worst sin . . . is to really hurt a child. It warps them for all their poor lives long. I haven't tried to see more of you because . . . it shows what a coward I am, too . . . I thought you must hate me.'

'Not a bit. I'm not such a fool. I do recognize the truth when it's presented to me and I knew you didn't mean me to hear it. Only, naturally, I rather imagined you might better be spared any necessity for contact with the abhorrent thing.' He smiled.

Sally couldn't. Her face was wincing and she changed the subject. 'What are your plans for yourself, Stephen? What do you want to do with your life?'

'I'll have to teach as soon as I get myself graduated from Johns Hopkins. I want some day to have a laboratory of my own . . . research work . . . biology. I'm interested in the origins of life. I'd like . . .'

Stephen spoke fiercely through his teeth, 'I'd like to get on the trail of that monstrous thing that's laid hold of you, Sally, and kill it, put it out of the world.'

'That's another good reason then for what I want to do.' After a pause she added timidly, 'Stephen, are you in love with any one? Would you like to be married?'

'Good Lord, Sally! How can I take care of a wife? I don't let myself think about falling in love.'

'At your age that must be hard, isn't it?'

'I don't know. Yes, I guess it is . . . sometimes. But I'm a first-rate disciplinarian. I've never given my emotional side its head . . . if you know what I mean.'

'Yes, dear.' Her voice was soft with a surprising sympathy. 'I'm sure I know what you mean . . . Stephen, I've made my will in your favor and I'm going to leave everything I have to you. I haven't so much. But I haven't so little either. You see, all those Hands cousins and great-aunts and uncles I told you about who didn't marry . . . Well, you know, the poor souls have all died and when they died they left, each his mite, to me. And — what's the Scotch proverb, 'Many a mickle makes a muckle'? That's what I have . . . a muckle. It's enough to put you through your Johns Hopkins and I want you to go to Europe every summer and enjoy yourself . . . not go and be waiter and tutor and things . . . but have a real boy's holiday for once in your poor life. And it's enough for a laboratory . . . I do believe, and it's certainly enough to get married on. Oh, Stephen, it makes me so happy to think of you . . . But, my *dear* boy!'

Stephen had pulled her hand over, had pressed his cheek against it, and was crying painfully as a Spartan must cry, sparsely and against his will.

'I want it all to be turned to happiness and life and courage and accomplishment,' went on Sally steadily and stroking his head with her free hand. 'It's my amends. And I want it to begin soon . . . as if my wishes, buried with me, were a sort of seed for you to make grow. I haven't been very effectual myself. You're not sentimental, but I am. Angela told me once I was "slushy" . . . what did you say?'

Stephen had said 'Damn Angela,' but refused to repeat himself.

'But, sentimental or not, my plans for — afterward — and you, have carried me through this thing . . . gloriously.

Begin soon. Don't wait. If there's any girl . . . don't wait.' Her voice seemed to bend as she said this and Stephen guessed that in some way waiting had robbed her of a personal desire. 'Tell me, Stephen,' she went on after another of her little silences, 'tell me . . . what do you think about . . . death . . . Or have you thought at all? You're so young.'

'Not so young as your other boys. I'm always older than the men I run with because it takes longer to put yourself through . . . I've thought a lot about death. It's like a big final laboratory test of humanity's forlorn hope, isn't it? Rather exciting.'

He was beginning to be able to look up, was rubbing his glasses and winking the long wet lashes of his eyes at her.

Sally nodded.

'I like what you said . . . it's brave. I've never been afraid for myself, though dreadfully afraid of losing people I love. But, as a personal experience, it's easy . . . so natural. You don't have to make any effort or assume any responsibility or come to any decision . . . a child being put to bed. It's a bore to leave the nursery toys and lights and the play-fellows . . . even though you know they will all follow very soon . . . but "Nurse knows what's best for little boys and girls."'

She laughed gayly . . . like a child.

That laugh of hers and the dense rustling shadow of the great fatherly tree upon her and her eyes shining out of it . . . became in Stephen's memory more than a beautiful picture: they were a challenge, a marching banner, and a song . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

LYDIA UNDERSTANDS

LYDIA FANE had fallen into the habit of listening to Pepper's lessons. Being a spoiled child, it did not occur to her that there was any reason why she should not pass her mornings in any way she pleased and it decidedly pleased her to follow with attention the lucid explanations and compelling instructions given to Pepper by young Stephen Hands. That her presence could cause him any embarrassment or annoyance simply did not enter her head at all. She would sit at the end of their table, sometimes in the living-room, sometimes out of doors, her chin cupped in her palm and on her face a look of meekness, which was quite at odds with its more habitual range of expression.

At first the small listening figure disconcerted Stephen unbearably; knowing as he did the Fane talent for good-humored raillery, he could not but suspect mockery under its meekness, and he told himself crossly that if the other young Fane expected to receive instruction, her parents should be made to pay for it. But, after a fortnight or so, he grew accustomed to the fair-haired creature propped there, listening so attentively without a murmur of interruption or of comment, betraying puzzlement only by a puckered brow and illumination by a dancing radiance of blue eyes; he began to believe that she was really as respectful of his knowledge as she looked, his vanity was attacked and before long he would have been offended if she had not tiptoed in or out upon them at the appointed hour.

Lydia's meekness was in fact quite sincere. She considered Stephen's a master intellect and made no scruple of showing her humility, not having learned as yet the intoxicating effect of such flattery upon the intellectual male. She had an altogether entrancing way of approaching him at leisure

moments in the garden or in the bow-window of the hall. 'Now, Mr. Hands,' she would say, opening her long eyes upon him with a shining gravity, 'I wonder if this is an awfully silly idear' . . . like many members of the old New York Tory families, Lydia would attach that 'r' to her 'sofas' and 'ideas' . . . 'I wish you would be perfectly frank and tell me . . .' And something of this sort would follow . . .

'If a note is slowed down . . . like the graphophone when you turn that little time-regulator, it doesn't sound like one note, does it? but like a long-drawn-out line of connected sounds . . . a sort of musical drawl, do you see? Well, suppose you could do the same thing with experience . . . well, doesn't thinking of that make you feel that our time-sense is just a matter of chance . . . or that there really isn't any such thing as . . . I guess you'd call it . . . abstract time? Something happens, but awareness of it reaches your consciousness just according to the limit of your powers of receptivity. Doesn't it? I mean, if you hear slowly or see slowly, the sound or the act, as far as you are concerned, happens slowly to you. Do you see what I mean?'

Stephen would say 'Yes,' fascinated less by what she was trying to say than by the great earnestness and eagerness with which she was saying it.

'Now . . . this is the idear: suppose life was like that. Suppose a person's life was one great note: . . . but it had to come to us little by little, piece by piece, because of the limitations of our powers of — of living. For instance, my life is happening to me slowly, but it's really begun and in the middle and ended . . . going on all at once like a note. Do you suppose that might explain the queer way people see ahead sometimes or feel that they've done all this or that before? It may all be instantaneous to our inner consciousness, but only possible to be grasped piece by piece by our senses, by what we call our selves.' She would laugh suddenly and blush. 'Isn't that a crazy idear? It's a regular puzzle, isn't it? I got thinking of it last night and it kept me awake for hours. It started about stars and how we don't

see them at all ever . . . just the light that has reached us maybe millions of years after the star has gone dark.' One day she brought him a poem. 'I had a queer idear about God,' she told him, 'and I tried to make a poem about it. It's turned into blank verse. Would you mind if I read it to you? It can't be worse than Pepper's Daily Theme.'

She read him the poem about God. Having had no don'ts placed upon its powers of investigation, Lydia's spirit had rushed irreverently into all possible corners . . . always in the happiest mood, much as a cavalier dragon-fly might thrust his rainbow javelin into the shadowy corners of a garden. The poem about God was very blank verse indeed, but in a crude way it did express her dramatic 'idear.'

'God speaks to Man,' Lydia had written in her great striding hand, 'falling at Man's feet and hiding His own pitiless eyes in wings . . .

"Forgive me, patient being, you have taught me mercy,
You have pierced my heart with love.
For I have heard you pray with pitiful trust,
And seen you watch the dreadful death of your beloved
And lo, you came again begging forgiveness of me for your pain!
You have seen the tearing terror of the ruthless winds . . ."

('Don't you rather like that, Mr. Hands? These next few lines are the best.)

"The dread upheaval of the reckless earth,
The shooting of the star in errant fire,
The pallid creaking of the floes of ice.
You have endured the famine and the plague,
Have seen your old age starve and freeze and weep . . .
And thanked me for my 'merciful gift' of . . . sleep."

('I know I oughtn't to put a rhyme in there, but it just happened and I was sort of proud of it.)

"So by your faith and penitence and prayer,
Your sense of sin and groping touch of love,
By your great patience and astounding faith
You have made something of me great as Man,

Kind as his kindness, gentle as his trust,
Just like his justice . . . can you then forgive?
See my bright head I lay upon your feet
And my veiled forehead on your work-worn hand . . .
Forgive your God who learns to comprehend,
Forgive Omnipotence who hath learned finite . . . Love!"

Stephen was left rather breathless by her poem. Here was a questioner as persevering and as fearless as himself, but in a vein as different as that of Icarus from Galileo. Lydia was a philosopher, perhaps, a mystic, but her imagination leapt a league ahead of her powers of analysis or reason. It was, to the plodding biologist, a fascinating phenomenon, this little feminine being, golden-haired, ignorant, absurd, getting herself embarked like the Jumlies in their historic sieve on such unfathomable waters. She was not always so impersonal. There were times when she would pelt him with questions as direct and sometimes as embarrassing as a child's. Jacob Crool was right . . . both she and Pepper stood in need of 'trimming.' At this time especially, Lydia gave the impression mentally of wild and untidy growth, vitally wanting a pruning-scissors.

On a day not long before his departure . . . Johns Hopkins demanding his return . . . she approached him in one of her more personal humors. He had been correcting Pepper's Daily Theme and chuckling over it, for, if the Limb had not inherited his father's powers of facile and vigorous expression, he had certainly his own gifts of originality and energy.

Stephen had just annotated the following sentences:

'The word Tradition is defined in the dictionary as the handing down of opinions or practices to posterity unwritten. Its derivation seems to be Lat. *trans.* over (*dare* give), to give over, something given over. Its effect upon humanity seems to be paralysis. Tradition makes a fresh start impossible and deforms the spine of every generation. A fellow can't make a fool of himself, jump around, with a bundle of his grandparents' furniture on his back, but neither can he step out or get strength for poking into byways. He

has to keep to the road and his nose is in the dust.' So much for Pepper on the theme, Tradition. Pepper's sister at this point strolled over from the mantel where she had been disastrously tampering with the porcelain clock and had decided to let it alone and allow Pepper to take the blame for its condition.

'Have you liked being our tutor?' she asked suddenly and sat down by him rather close, looking into his face. She wore a blue-flowered gown of dimity which spread out around her letting the light through all about the edge of her body like an azure aureole.

'In spots,' Stephen answered, flushing and folding up his paper.

'What things have you liked? And what things haven't you liked? Do you think Pepper will ever amount to anything? Or will he be a child all his life?'

'Oh, no, I think he will develop normally.'

Lydia looked only faintly reassured. 'When do you suppose he'll begin to seem more normal?'

'You're rather hard on him, aren't you?'

'I don't know . . . perhaps. But I don't especially necessarily like people to be normal, do you? But . . . first . . . tell me what you've liked about us. You've liked Father?'

'Immensely.'

'And Mother?'

'More than I can say.'

'And Pepper?'

'A lot.'

'Er . . . then what haven't you liked? . . . Has it been hard work?'

Stephen put Pepper's theme carefully into an inside pocket of his coat, removed his glasses, and folded his arms over his chest as though to guard young Fane's literary achievement from a covetous world. He looked at Lydia sternly.

'There's been only one really hard thing about my . . . job here.'

Lydia, with lively interest, leaned closer and demanded, 'What?'

'Trying,' said Stephen, 'not to fall in love with you.'

She kept her changed eyes bravely upon him.

'About two weeks ago,' Stephen went on more sternly, 'I stopped trying.'

Lydia drew back inch by inch until she reached the limits of the window-seat where she sat still, her head drawn up, listening. Her lips were parted, the color had risen all over her face and she was blinking rapidly. But there was so far no real emotion in her face but one of grave astonishment.

'I suppose you are joking,' she said. 'I don't like it.'

'I am *not*. I'm a mile from the remotest edge of joking. I consider it not quite the thing for a tutor to make love to his pupil's sister or his employer's daughter, and until two weeks ago I had no intention of allowing myself to fall in love with any one. I should, of course,' went on Stephen with painstaking honesty, 'have been very much more extravagantly in love with you than I am if I had given my feelings free rein from the beginning. I have forced myself to think of you as a child . . . not to take you seriously. I hadn't any prospects. Now I have. I shall be able to marry. I would like to marry you.'

'I knew,' cried Lydia, and her eyes filled with tears, 'that my idears were silly and that you didn't take my poetry seriously . . . and I've been telling you all my idears and showing you my poems . . . and all the time you weren't taking me seriously and were thinking of me as a child.'

'I have *forced* myself to think of you as a child. I must say, Lydia, that you have treated *me* like a grandfather.'

'But I'm very much afraid of you . . . in a way,' said Lydia, the tears running down her cheeks. 'I wouldn't have dared to think of asking you even to be my friend. You are very clever and rather oldish, you know . . . that is, one of the older men, and, besides, I've classed myself with Pepper. Being his tutor, you see, he's in *awr* of you.'

'I haven't seen any signs of "*awr*" about him.'

'Freshness with Pepper *is . . . awr*,' said Lydia. 'But, you see, Mr. Hands —'

'I wish you'd call me Stephen.'

'Honestly I can't. You're too clever and scientific . . . you know so much. Biology? My goodness!'

For the first time in his life Stephen had a quiver of disloyalty towards his scientific mistress.

'That hasn't much to do with my love for you, Lydia, has it?' He hesitated. 'It isn't that . . . I am . . . personally . . . distasteful . . . to you, is it?'

He bent forward over locked hands, his eye-glasses dangling lower than his knees and, listening to his strained and shrinking voice and seeing this cramped attitude of feeling and suspense, Lydia began to take in the truth that this ironic young man loved her. She drew in her breath as though there were a weight on her young breast.

'Oh, no,' she said, 'you are personally . . . lovely.' Even at that instant, Stephen came near to laughing. 'I am so — complimented,' she went on, looking rather like the portrait of her own great-grandmother in a flowered brocade gown against the opposite wall, 'that you should think of — of caring for me at all.'

'I'm afraid you'll get lots of such compliments before you're through with us, Lydia.' Stephen drew his lids together and peered up. To his near-sightedness, she was a misty vision, with sun in her hair and moted beams across her shoulders, lovely and light and sensitive. She seemed to be quivering there, her breathing seemed to move her like the lift of uncertain wings. He was forbidden, by his iron habits of exactitude and control in matters which were serious to him, to express in poetry or by hyperbole the feeling which she caused him. And yet no other words could possibly let her know the necessity of her loveliness to him, the need he had of her questing wildness of mind and heart, the fearlessness of her, the tender beauty.

'I have never met any one so honest and brave as you are, Lydia,' he said, 'nor any one so lovely. I've watched you all

the time. You're beautiful. Really beautiful. You are never unkind nor underhand nor stupidly angry. You seem to be . . . serene, I think, like your mother, you're very good, but, unlike your mother, you're never hurt or sad . . .'

'I'm hurt now . . . and sad,' said Lydia softly.

He felt that, as he had never felt anything before in all his life. The small soft speech cut down through all the careful defenses of his philosophy. The pain and terror of it kept him silent.

'Because,' she went on courageously, 'I'm so stupid . . . and because you say you . . . love me.'

'Don't you want me to love you?' he asked painfully, but with his ironic twist of voice and lip.

'No — no.'

'Why? I can't help it very well.'

'But — until two weeks ago — you did help it.'

'Oh, I imagined I did. I don't suppose I was succeeding very well or the thing wouldn't have sprung at my throat the second the bars were down. Anyway, it's got me now and it will always have me. I take things hard. I still love some one I loved when I was ten years old.'

'But we all do that, Mr. Hands. Think of the people I love . . . !'

'Yes. But I've hardly seen this person since . . . and she hurt me like the devil . . . almost as much as you do . . .'

'Aren't you really in love with *her*?'

'Yes. But she's nearly fifty and in a few weeks she'll be . . . gone. She is going to die, Lydia.' Stephen set his teeth. 'You've got to take her place. I haven't anybody else . . . but Nicholas . . . and he isn't a woman.'

'Who is she?'

'A cousin of mine. She wants me to marry you.'

'But she doesn't know me.'

'I'd like her to see you . . . once . . . That is . . . if you are going to say "Yes" . . . Lydia.'

Then Lydia remembered a 'yes' and its consequences; and a longing for Little John, terrible, incredible, and real,

swept over her body and her brain so that she sat there with her eyes closed forgetful of Stephen Hands, feeling against her head, not the smooth window-glass, but the rough bark of an apple tree and over her the heavy warmth of August and on her lips the sweet young eager lips of Little John.

'I don't suppose you can say it . . . so soon, can you?' said Stephen, a long while later, patiently.

Lydia opened her eyes and looked at him. The blue eyes seemed to gather him together slowly out of invisibility. Stephen was white.

'Say what?' asked Lydia.

He had his cruel answer already — what, oh, what could she have been thinking of to forget him so entirely just at that moment of his life? — but he repeated hoarsely, "'Yes.'"

'I've said it . . . to Little John Gregory,' said Lydia, and, standing up, a blaze of color in her face and her eyes wild, she went past him down the length of the sun-barred room and up the stairs. Her hair caught a blaze of sun, then her white dress. So bright she was for an instant to his sick and dazzled eyes that when she moved up into the shadow she seemed to have been blown out of the reach of his senses like a flame.

She was in the world somewhere, of course, and would be, but not for him, the fault perhaps of his slowness of perception . . . like her theory . . . what was it? . . . there was no such thing as abstract time, no such thing as separate experience . . . no such thing for him as Lydia ever again, gone up the staircase, out of the reach of this baffled grasping . . . the great note of love, struck, but his ear attuned to hold only this one little minor vibration of it to the end.

Lydia went up to her bedroom where, as though performing a long-established rite, she walked to her window, closed her eyes and said just above her breath, 'Johnnie.' She then moved to her dressing-table, stared fixedly at a scarlet-faced, sapphire-eyed stranger in its mirror, and repeated,

'Johnnie.' In the same ritualistic fashion she visited the door and, gazing at its panels without any appropriate change in her visual adjustment, she whispered, 'Johnnie.' Her fourth station was the bed, but here she faltered in the ceremony and fell on her knees. She drew her pillow to her, wrapped her arms around it, thrust her face into it. 'Little John,' she yearned.

It astonished her to know that quite definitely she wanted the body of John Gregory to be pressed closely against hers, knee to knee, breast to breast, mouth to mouth, closer, closer, closest, until the two breaths, the two bodies, and the two lives were one.

'Nobody ever told me it would be like this . . .' An echo came to her. 'Oh, John darling, I have learned. Oh, my sweet poor dear, I understand.'

Later, after remembrance had taught her a full comprehension of her August blindness, her garden cruelties, she threw herself upon her desk where she had put so many of her 'idears' into free verse for Stephen's criticism, and she began to write.

'My dearest, dearest Johnnie, I understand now and I love you . . .'

She stopped because the red flood of an emotion she had never felt before, a sort of shame and fear, rose across her face and dimmed her vision. She let her head drop on the page where her hair swept the ink of 'love' blotting out that little potent word of her confession. No . . . she couldn't tell him so much . . . so . . . everything . . . until she had seen his eyes, was sure he still cared for her, had not forgotten, changed, successfully taught himself to hate her. But neither could she wait for the fulfillment of her wishes. She had never been taught that lesson of patience and control.

When Lydia, in her gray traveling dress, came down the stairs half an hour later, she was pale, a tremulous smile of adventure on her lips and an uncertain aurora in her eyes. The long room, of which Joseph disapproved as 'new-fangled,' was empty, and its bay-window brought her in her

utter self-absorption no thought whatever of poor Stephen Hands who by a chance word had given her awareness of her miracle. In fact, Stephen had gone out of the house into the little near-by woods. Pepper was reading in the garden, glad that his parents' absence permitted him the rapture of lying on his stomach in the damp grass.

'Where you going?' asked Pepper, not looking higher than her passing ankles which twinkled by about a foot before his nose.

'To Philadelphia,' answered Lydia in the clear and direct fashion of the Fanes, 'on my own business. Letter of explanation to parents on the hall table. See they get it as soon as they get back from Albany. Don't read it yourself.'

She slammed the garden door, smiling excitedly to see over her shoulder that Pepper had risen and was standing, wide-mouthed, with grass in his rumpled hair.

CHAPTER XIX

A MAN IN THE HOUSE

ABBHEY GREGORY's consent to her nephew's plans for his son had been by no means so spontaneous as they had been made to appear to Joseph. Abbey, at this time, was over eighty years old and would not have welcomed one-and-twenty of either sex across her threshold. But her will-power based on vanity and readily accessible to flattery had passed softly into the control of a trained nurse, one of these young solid hard-faced women, muscular, apple red and white, who had her own anticipations of the coming of a youthful nephew from New York.

'You ought to have a man in the house, Miss Gregory,' said Sophie Lex with firmness; then, before the old vain voice could finish its protests, 'Oh, no, it won't be any trouble. I'll take all that off your shoulders . . . But he can have his own key . . . There's the third-story front . . . No, Miss Annie don't use it . . . No, I never have seen her there, not once . . . Oh, no, Miss Gregory, she naps in her own bedroom, second-story back . . .'

As for Miss Anna Farralee, companion and dependent, when she heard that John Gregory was coming to spend the winter with Miss Gregory, she went into her room and cried for an hour. She had weak spirits and she was afraid of men.

This fear, to those familiar with the natural timidity and eventual malleability of the average male, is difficult to comprehend, but there are women who suffer indescribable torment from it all their lives. It should be listed with the other phobias . . . 'Homophobia'; its victims, self-conscious and cloistered girls, mercifully growing rarer, into whose heads exaggerated ideas of propriety and sex-difference have been inserted by 'Mamma'; ugly women who think beauty a necessary lubrication for all relationships with the other sex;

timid and virgin women who are burdened with a great subconscious load of entangled and mysterious suppressions . . . Anna Farralees . . . whose one real dread is being left alone in any place at any hour for any purpose, to entertain or interview a man.

Now, Anna knew that there would be moments when she would necessarily be left alone with this John Gregory, nay, worse, be expected to remain alone with him. When, not without a malicious comprehension of its distastefulness, Miss Lex had confirmed to her fellow worker the horrid news, Miss Anna therefore betook herself to her bedroom . . . not the second-story back, for Miss Abbey had not yet returned to 1699 Spruce Street . . . and cried for an hour. At intervals during the time before they went back to the city she cried, sometimes only a few furtive tears in a corner, sometimes with weak and miserable sobbings behind closed doors.

When they, Miss Anna and Miss Lex, got Miss Abbey with her trunks and her lunch basket and her umbrellas and her bags out of the cab before the city house, John Gregory was there to meet them. In fact, looking slender and flushed and shy, he ran down the front steps and took a valise out of the sagging hand of Anna Farralee. Anna gave him a pale scared look and caught from him a dark glance, fully as furtive and as fugitive as her own. Two fears make one panic — the youth and the old maid flew apart.

John received upon his tightened arm the weight of Great-Aunt Abbey. The years had not disguised her betraying peculiarities, they had become as much more apparent as had the outline of her skull with its narrowness between the ears and its small loose-hung lower jaw. The identical bonnet freshly trimmed in violets rested as nearly on the tip of her nose, dim eyes peered out more tragically absurd from under it.

'Ah, Johnnie . . . Johnnie . . . careful, careful . . . That is my reticule . . . jet, a present from my dear friend Louise Ames, such a lovely woman. Where is the little black bag? Oh, Annie has it. Dear Annie thinks of everything. Miss

Lex, this is my great-nephew, John Gregory. His father brought him to see me several years ago . . . but there has not been enough intercourse. No, families don't hold together as they used. And' . . . as she came into the hall, panting a little, resting her gloved hand on John's arm and tilting back her head so that she could see him under that hat-brim, 'and how is our wonderful Hooker, Little John?'

'As wonderful as ever, Aunt Abbey,' returned John dutifully, flushing and ashamed that he must always play the hypocrite about that hateful bird.

'Such a naughty little boy as you were, playing truant from Sunday School. But Jo did whip you soundly . . .' She chirped with a cheerful sort of relish, remembering the noise of that vigorous ruler as of cracking ice and John's anguished howlings. But remembering, too, as she chirped, that she was very tender-hearted, she changed the chirp into a sigh. 'But I gave you the parrot and that made it all right, didn't it, Johnnie? You have grown very tall. You look like your mother . . . delicate.'

'We'll plump him up,' said Miss Lex vigorously and so loudly that Johnnie jumped.

His haunted young eyes fled from one to the other of the women's faces: the vain vague white old mask of 'Awn-Tabby'; the hard and greedy face of Sophie Lex, boring him with her round bright eyes, biting at him with her clean toothy smile; the furtive pallid countenance of poor Anna Farralee, like something driven from shadows to blink at light . . . a fishlike being who would lurk by preference under ledges where the water was opaque and green. Her eyes were of just that color, flat, pink-lidded, veiled. The lovely little face of Lydia, with its archaic beauty, its *insouciance*, swam there cruelly before his wounded memory. He caught at two large valises and ran with them up the stairs.

Anna, loping up a few minutes later, urgent for tears and solitude, found him in her room and gave a gasping cry.

'Er . . . er . . . I just set down your bag,' stammered poor Little John. 'I . . . I'm so glad you're back, Miss Farralee . . .

It's been sort of . . . I mean, lonesome in this big house . . . and with a queer shy violence he kissed Anna on the cheek.

It was no longer lonesome in the house; that is, it was no longer lonesome for Little John. He might have complained of many things if he had been of a complaining temperament, but never of loneliness or of neglect.

Twice daily he paid his respects to Aunt Abbey in her immense second-story front, furnished hugely, and heated to fever-temperature by the glowing Franklin stove. She sat in a big horse-hair armchair with her broad little kid-clothed feet on an old worsted-work stool and asked him questions and laid little traps for his flattery, into which John gently fell and climbed out of with a gingerly dexterity.

'I like pretty hands, John, I always thought pretty hands a great asset to a lady. I hope when you marry, your wife will have pretty hands.'

A pinching and stroking of the spotted old fingers on her knee drew from John, 'Yours are very pretty, aren't they, Aunt Abbey?'

'They used to be considered so . . . but . . . at my age . . .'

'They're still very lovely, Aunt Abbey . . . honestly . . . I mean . . .'

'You must tell me about the young people and their doings, Johnnie. I never see any young people.' (John felt that he was in no better case.) 'They don't take any trouble over old women like me. Nicholas now . . . is he as handsome as he used to be? And does he behave himself, make his father and mother happy? Martin is such a hard worker, has done so much for his children. I have a photograph of Angela. I don't like the way she dresses her hair. I like to see the brow. A brow is beautiful.' She lifted her hand to her own high cliff of forehead spotted with the dark flecks of age and veined alarmingly. 'And Angela's back is so exposed in that gown. A back is not pretty. Arms are pretty and a bosom, but I don't like to see backs. I put the photograph away, with some other things — to send out to the missionaries —

they have so little pleasure in their lives. I hope you won't marry a girl who shows her back, John. A bosom can be pretty and bare arms . . . but not a back . . .'

The interviews with Aunt Abbey were a torment to John. She could not hear him unless he raised his shy voice to a shout and when he spoke so loud she told him not to 'scream' . . . she wasn't deaf, that his voice was not well placed. Some young men had such beautifully modulated voices . . . there had been a Mr. Thorpe she once knew very well . . . ah, to be sure, he had given her the parrot . . . She heard the Fanes had taken Martin's little old house on Maple Lane. Nice people, the Fanes, but what a pity 'young' Angus Fane had so forgot himself as to write these dreadful books. Yes, she had tried to read 'Masks.' Oh, no, with a flock of chirps urgent for higher purer air, 'life isn't like that, John.' One needn't know such people. Nice men never had such ideas, and, as for the women, well, she hoped Angus never allowed his daughter to read his books . . . He had a little daughter, she believed. 'How red your ears are, John. Such a misfortune for a young man to have red ears. Annie has a lotion for chilblains. I'll tell her to let you rub it on your ears.'

To all this John could think of nothing to say, and what vacant slavish statements he produced frightened him with their insipidity when he was forced to shout them over and over in a high strained key. But he was patient, well trained by Joseph, and convinced of the necessity for such simple instructions as 'Submit thyself lowly and reverently to all thy betters.' He believed Aunt Abbey, on account of her advanced age and pronounced virtue, to be his 'better.' He got through his visits to her pretty well. The burden is indeed made light and easy for the lowly of spirit.

It was far more difficult to adapt his temperament and his experience to the assaults of Sophie Lex. Towards her Johnnie began immediately to go in a terror abject and profound. His helplessness was that of the snake-charmed Bandar-log. She would bring him breakfast on a tray, unless he managed to elude her by rising at the crack of dawn, and

she would seat her solid starchy person on the foot of his bed to watch him eat it.

Johnnie choked over his coffee, drinking with lowered lids, water in his eyes, holding his pajama jacket together at the throat.

'I wish you wouldn't, Miss Lex.'

'No trouble, I assure you, Mr. Johnnie. You study so late. I see your light going ever so long. Would you like me to come in with an egg-nog before I turn in? Do you a world of good, make you sleep like a top.'

If it had not been for Anna Farralee, there is no telling what might not have befallen poor Little John. Anna, alone, strangely and suddenly revealed as a watch-dog, stood between him and the vaguely interpreted dangers of Miss Sophie Lex. Sooner or later, deprived of outside aid, he felt that the nurse would have her way with him . . . what that way was he could not quite determine, but it would be inclusive, absolute.

Sometimes, watching her smile, he all but heard her say, 'The better to eat you with, my dear . . .'

John loved Miss Anna for her queer opportune appearances, her furtive coughings and fidgetings, her scared breathless announcements of 'Miss Abbey's bell, I *think*, Miss Lex.'

Once, to his anguish, the nurse found him crying on his sofa. The occasion was one which it took his self-respect many years to live down . . . it woke him at night sweating from dream-repetitions.

She came in, for no reason, suddenly, without knocking, late at night. He should have been in bed, but his terrible legal tasks being finished for that monster crammer, Samuel Lavender, a merciless little spitting man with huge horn spectacles, such a tidal wave of desolation and despair, of gnawing love for his lost and silent Lydia, came over him that it had thrown him down there and drowned him. He had wept with long silent smothered sobs into his silky patch-work pillow.

Weeping, he had felt an antiseptic hand upon him, a white-starched chest pressed against his side. He threw up his head, incredulous, horrified. Sophie Lex knelt there.

'I knew you were down in the dumps, old boy . . . intuition told me I'd find you like this,' she said, and he felt that, this time, she would certainly bite him with those bright bared teeth. She stroked his hair. 'Here, you poor kiddie, let Momma comfort you.'

She sat down, pulling up his head which she set like a flower-pot, Johnnie fancied, on her stout firm knees, and she patted him, and presently, while he lay stiff and perspiring from head to foot, she kissed him on his hot wet cheek. 'Momma's boy! Homesick, kiddie? Gee, him needs a lot of lovin' . . .'

In another instant, John would have put his arms about her and returned her kiss . . . not because she tempted him, God knows, nor because he was a weak and inflammable young man, but because his dignity demanded that he take control of the ghastly situation and wring from it a sort of dignity. Short of killing her, for which he was too gentle and too kind, there was no way for him to assert his manhood and regain his self-respect but by sitting up, taking her on his knee, and letting her kiss him to his death. She was twenty-four years old, trim and not uncomely; experience had not diminished her self-confidence. She was very sure of being able to 'handle' John.

There have been all sorts of martyrs for all manner of causes.

Miss Anna Farralee saved John Gregory.

She had heard the murmur of Sophie's voice, a greedy murmur propelled through clenched teeth, and, putting on a flannel gown covered with palm trees and giraffes and carefully removing five celluloid 'wavers' from her hair, she had lighted her candle and crept down the stairs with the courage of desperation, to Little John's quarters, suspecting Miss Lex, but by no means sure of what design.

She tapped on Johnnie's door and Sophie incontinently

dived out from under John's head which dropped painfully down on the sofa's edge.

'That snooping virgin,' said Sophie, 'she's on to us all righty, John.'

She marched over and threw open the door. 'I thought it would be you,' she said with insolence. 'I came to tell this child to go bedsy-bye. You help the good work along, Miss Annie, won't you? Beauty sleep and all that. It's two A.M. and no time for little boys to be awake.'

'You'll wake up Miss Abbey,' said Anna, trembling all over and the candle shaking in her hand. 'Go upstairs to her, Miss Lex, at once. I heard her bell. Oh, Mr. Johnnie, Mr. Johnnie.'

Johnnie stood in the middle of the room. He was tear-stained, disheveled, his collar open, his hair on end. Back of Sophie, he shook his head at Anna Farralee and made a gesture of despair and of appeal. Sophie went out and rattled starchily away. She gave John a glance over her shoulder and he changed his expression just in time to . . . blankness.

Miss Anna came in and shut the door.

'Better lock yourself in after this,' she whispered. 'Good-night.'

John kept his eyes down. He was as scarlet as poor Miss Farralee. 'Thank you, Miss Annie, I will. Oh, thank you. Good-night.' They both looked guilty and distraught.

Miss Anna loped quietly away. Her maternal and protective instincts, first touched by an impulsive boyish kiss, were thoroughly aroused. She would do anything, dare anything, to save her Little John. And still, she was not in the least sure from what she was to save him. She would not, at any rate, permit her imagination to tell her the truth concerning Sophie Lex.

Little John did not sleep very well that night. He had a sort of chill and lay for a long time under his covers, with chattering teeth.

CHAPTER XX

LOVE SEEN THROUGH A CRACK

THE housemaid at 1699 Spruce Street was active, haughty, and handsome. She disliked Miss Abbey, who in the sweetest voice and with the most gracious manner showed neither mercy nor consideration, and would send a fellow-being up and down stairs from garret to cellar a dozen times for articles which, with a little foresight, might all have been brought at once. Martha detested Sophie Lex for her loud hard cheerful insolence, and she despised Miss Anna Farralee for her timidities. In short, knowing herself to be the best woman in the house, Martha Ray, American and Protestant, suffered from what the Freudians would call a superiority complex and by way of protest got through her work as inefficiently as her temperament would possibly allow her to do. Let the Freudians work out the wherefores of that reaction. It is enough for us to recognize its familiarity. In the matter of answering the front-door bell, for instance, Martha's consciousness went through such an argument as this: 'Humph . . . some one at the door, wants to see Miss Abbey. That poor old critter could never get down all them steps to answer it, and the trained nurse . . . huh, she run to open a door? not her high and mightiness. And the Farralee woman, she'd fancy MEN and BURGLARS. Very well, then, if nobody else in the house hasn't got the strength or the common sense or the sand to go open a front door, I suppose I, Martha Ray, ull just have to go and do it myself.'

By the time this process was concluded . . . and it went on quite unaffected by the knowledge that it was her duty, for which she was paid, to open that door . . . the bell would have rung once or twice and often the ringer would have gone away.

On one of those late September afternoons, only a day or

two after Sophie's visit to John's bedroom, the ringer showed an unusual and nervous persistence. Three times the bell had jangled loudly before Martha, snarling to herself, came to the inside of the door.

Through the net curtains she saw a straight and slender silhouette, the head seemed to be set lightly on the body. It was not a silhouette familiar to Miss Abbey's threshold. Martha opened the door.

'Mr. John Gregory is living here, isn't he?' asked a brave and breathless voice.

Martha looked the young woman up and down and her deep eyes sparkled in the afternoon sun.

'Yes, Miss.'

'I've come to see him. It's very important.'

'He's not in, Miss. He's with his tutor. He'll not be back for upwards of an hour.'

The lovely expectant face was covered with a delicate opening fan of color and the pupils of the strange long eyes under a jaunty hat-brim enlarged themselves.

'O-oh; then I must wait.'

'You don't want to see Miss Gregory or Miss Farralee?'

'No. I don't. I just want to see . . . him. Isn't there some place where I can wait? I don't know any one in Philadelphia. I thought . . . it is five o'clock . . . that he'd be home.'

'Come in,' said Martha, interested, and in the voice of feminine conspiracy. 'I won't say a word. Set in the parlor. And I'll catch Mr. Johnnie as he comes in. What name shall I tell him, Miss?'

'Lydia Fane . . . Miss Fane. It's most important.'

Martha opened the door of the front parlor.

'Better you set over there in that corner by the bookcase. Miss Lex isn't about, thank goodness . . . and Miss Annie is half blind.'

She closed the door quietly. Lydia with her plunging heart and fiery cheeks found herself in a great dark stiff room opening by folding doors, unfolded, into the back parlor more stiff and dark. Both rooms were papered in dark

brown and carpeted from wall to wall, both had round central tables draped in long scarlet cloths and bore lamps with big silk shades, and both were set about with stiff chairs and sofas, fire-screens and small footstools. There were glass-enclosed bookcases, glass-enclosed clocks and glass-enclosed vases of wax flowers, a grand piano draped in silk, the painting on an easel of some Sicilian landscape, a portrait of an ancient Gregory, weakly affable and handsome in his best clothes: crystal chandeliers hung from both ceilings and, beautiful and glittering, caught in the front room the red and golden lights of a small coal fire. It was the house of old age, so it was very hot. Lydia opened her little gray cloth jacket and smoothed her lacy frill. She looked at herself in the enormous gilt-edged mirror over the black mantel shelf and found her face at once seraphic and absurd.

'I have such a silly face,' she said, 'I don't believe John can really like it.'

She extinguished it in the shadowy corner suggested by Martha and sat to wait for John . . . an agony to her urgent temperament and to the pelting gambler's fury of her mood. She had run away from home, the journey had taken hours longer than she had anticipated, and her money, the allowance of three economical months, was gone. She had a return ticket in case . . . in case . . . John didn't want her. If he wanted her . . . why, then, she supposed, they would be 'engaged,' and she would naturally be introduced to Miss Abbey Gregory and be asked to spend the night. They would send a telegram to Mamma and Papa. The spoiled child, in need as never before of 'trimming,' sat there stiller than either of the young Fanes had ever sat before, her mental activities violently absorbing her mercurial physical restlessness.

Out along the leafy Philadelphia street the horses' hooves clop-clapped, clap-clopped, and the cab wheels rattled, street lamps were being lighted, the postman dropped a paper in the vestibule. That great hot room was getting very dim. She might not be able to see the expression in John's

eyes. She looked at the gas jets with their ground-glass globes. Were there any matches? She could make a spill, perhaps, and light it by the coals . . . Some one was opening the front door.

Lydia stood in the middle of the room and crumpled up in two terrified and icy hands the frill she had been smoothing out all day.

Martha had met the newcomer, Lydia heard her own name. Silence, the opening parlor door . . . a figure, stumbling and distraught . . .

Light came in from the street and from the hall, but she did not look into John's eyes. She couldn't. She stood in the middle of the carpet, her hands clutching at her frill.

'Lydia!' John gasped, 'it's . . . really . . . you?'

He came up to her and, without looking all the way up to his eyes, she saw him turn his head from side to side as though to be sure of not being watched, then he put out his hand and touched her.

Her eyes came up to his face and she began to laugh. A child that stops in the door with all the candles of a Christmas tree reflected in eyes of unearthly joy, laughs softly in just that breathless key.

'Oh, John darling, I understand . . . I had to come. You haven't changed? I was so dreadful to you. Now, I do love you . . .'

There lay a footstool between them and John kicked it away and got his young awkward arms around her. Just by catching her up from her feet, he carried her to the enormous sofa, a very hard and slippery one where nobody had ever loved before, and setting her down thereon he knelt before her and laid his head in her lap. She kept bending down to kiss his head between her hands. He pulled the gloves from them. Lydia and John were timid, exquisitely delicate, extravagant, uncertain . . . young. He was no longer a fierce and dark-faced Arab, wanting to hurt her, beat her, kill her . . . neither was he the censor . . . she was, for the time being, reformed enough for him! He was a tender wor-

shipful lover . . . now that he knew she loved him. Stammerer he forgot to be. He spoke the delirious and absurd swift words of passion . . . poetry, the gladness envied by the poet, of a skylark's brain.

Anna Farralee, loping down along the hall, paused at that half-open parlor door from which unwilling Martha had just now been summoned by an angry cook.

' . . . My beautiful, dear darling. You loveliest . . . You're like all the blue flowers in the garden. I wish you'd let down your hair, Lydia precious, like that first day, in a white gown; the sun shone right through you. I loved you then. Yes, I did, truly . . . that very first second. It was just as if I'd been waiting for you to come to me through the little white gate. Of course I won't let you talk . . . I need your lips. Oh, Lydia, what a wonderful, wonderful girl you are! You can't love me. I was such a beast. It's a dream . . . your coming . . . your being here . . . your loving me. I've been so hideously miserable. Well, now you can speak, don't waste a moment . . . tell me you love me. You'll have to say it every minute all day long for years before I'll be able to believe it.'

'I love you . . . Little *Dear John* . . .'

The kiss again . . . a long long pressure and a sigh.

Miss Anna Farralee, like doubting Thomas, having to see and touch, now for the first time believed that people said just such frantic incredible things and, in a front parlor, in Miss Abbey's front parlor, kissed each other. Was it nice? Was it proper? Ought young people to wrap each other up like that . . . a young man climbing from a girl's feet to her lips . . . a girl with her slender body supporting him, enfolding him, bending down to him her breast, her face, her mouth?

Miss Anna did not know that she was looking where tactful angels would have veiled their eyes and listening where honorable men and women would have closed their ears. She was entirely forgetful of Miss Anna Farralee. Life, through a crack in Miss Abbey's front parlor door, had revealed

itself to her at last. She could see its lovely dangerous and exciting silhouette and she listened to its rhythm, the antiphonal chant of . . . 'Love me' . . . 'I love you.'

John came to his senses, or out of them, perhaps. The ingrained fear of the world, the flesh, and the devil, the fear of God, woke in him. He rose and sat by Lydia. The ecstasy was broken, dimmed.

'Dearest girl,' he said, 'where are you spending the night?'

'Oh, here,' laughed Lydia. Her hat lay over one ear, her hair was in a mass about her neck, the frill was like the crumpled handkerchief of grief, her face was white, her lips scarlet, her eyes wild.

John bit his lip and blinked. 'You must come up at once and meet Aunt Abbey. I — I supposed you had come with some one . . .'

'I ran away from home. I left a letter for them telling them that I had to see you on important private business. I'll telegraph them that we are engaged. Oh, Johnnie, isn't it exciting . . . queer . . . you and me . . . engaged?'

'Wait down here a moment, Lydia. I'll go up and explain it to Aunt Abbey.'

He did not look much more presentable than she did, his hair rumpled by her hands and his face subtly disordered by unbearable and unaccustomed joy. He started, however, for the door and Anna fled before him, hiding herself in the coat-closet. Miss Sophie Lex met him on the landing of the stairs.

'What's up, Johnnie-boy?' she asked him pertly.

John spoke with frosty and unwonted dignity. 'My fiancée is downstairs, Miss Lex, and I want her to see Miss Gregory. She will be spending the night here. You had better give her my room and I can sleep on the cot in the sewing-room.'

'Your fian-cay?' repeated loudly Sophie Lex. 'Since . . . *when?*' and her voice dropped its weight like a springing panther on that 'when.'

John would have passed her, but she simply put her muscular hand on his arm and made him stop.

'Look here, son, don't you try to put over any funny business with your Aunt Abbey. Just you wait until Sophie Lex has given your young woman a once-over before we disturb an aged invalid . . .'

He stood irresolute, not knowing his duty, whether to go down and help his Lydia or to seize the opportunity for presenting his case to Aunt Abbey. The thought of having to shout out his information several times gave him pause, and . . . it was too late to get to Lydia. Miss Lex and she had met. He waited, gnawing his finger, looking and listening over the banisters like an eight-year-old expectant of a summons.

After a five-minute interview Miss Lex came up.

She mounted to John and passed him like the front rank of a regiment. She brushed him aside and went on up to Miss Abbey's room. John followed. As he arrived at the door, it was closed and locked in his face.

Miss Lex came close to Miss Abbey, who lifted her long sheep face and her cold vain eyes.

'There's a young woman downstairs,' shouted Sophie, 'who's come alone from New York to see Mr. Johnnie. She's been hugging and kissing him in your front parlor. She wants to spend the night. I told her to guess again.'

'What did you say, Miss Lex? I can't understand. A young woman from New York to see my nephew . . . came alone?'

'Not the sort of person you'd receive, Miss Gregory. Where Mr. Johnnie picked her up, I don't guess, but he's only a youngster and a woman like that, she knows her way about.'

'Oh, Miss Lex . . . in the house . . . in the parlor . . . ? How did she get in?'

Here Johnnie began to hammer on the door and Sophie at once admitted him.

'Aunt Abbey, Miss Lydia Fane is downstairs. We are engaged. She is alone here and must spend the night. She may have my room.'

'Miss Fane? Angus Fane's daughter . . . ? From Kaaterskill . . . a whole day's journey? Engaged?' Johnnie had spoken so loudly that there was, for once, no need of repetition. 'My dear John . . . does your father know?'

'Not yet. It's just happened.'

Sophie Lex laughed. 'She must have come here to ask him to marry her . . . I just bet she wanted marryin' bad enough . . .'

Miss Abbey trembled, voice and body together. 'Is she alone, Johnnie? Does her father know? Would her mother permit it? I cannot assume responsibility for such extraordinary behavior. How old is . . . Lydia?'

'She is just eighteen,' said John. 'She's lovely. I will bring her up.'

'No . . . no . . . no. Johnnie, stop. I really can't see her. I don't know . . . I have never been called upon to deal with such situations . . .'

'She's my fiancée!' shouted Johnnie.

'Your father does not know . . .'

'I was of age last week!' screamed Johnnie.

'I cannot assume responsibility. Oh, dear, oh, dear, why did I let you come? I might have known . . . a wild young man . . . an old woman . . . Oh, I am sure your father will punish you severely, John. Indeed, he will be angry and distressed. I am sure he expected you to mind your books and to avoid young women. And this Miss Fane . . . she can't, indeed, be just what we Gregorys would approve of . . . indeed she can't or she would never have come alone to visit you at this hour. No. No. She must go elsewhere.'

'She has nowhere to go,' cried John. 'Please see her, Aunt Abbey, before you make up your mind. Miss Lex has given you a vulgar and wicked misstatement. I mean . . . really . . . she has told you lies.'

'That's about enough from you, young man,' growled

Sophie. 'I'll put a spoke in your wheel if you don't watch out.' She said this through her teeth, set as if in his flesh, and immediately thereafter wheeled upon Miss Abbey.

'He's not what you fancy, Miss Gregory, that young nephew of yours, not by a pretty long shot. Looks innocent enough, but I could tell you things . . . I've had my hands full with him. I'd a mind to leave you if he didn't pull up . . . asked me into his bedroom at two A.M., he did . . . one night . . . pretended illness . . . Miss Annie can tell you . . .'

'Oh, hush, please, Miss Lex. You mustn't leave me, you know. I'm quite an old woman now. John, you must tell this young . . . Lydia . . . to go away at once . . . and I'm afraid I shall have to ask your father to make some other arrangements for you. I can't stand this sort of thing. I'm not used to it. And after giving you Hooker, too. I expected different things from you. Dear . . . dear . . . Joseph will be very much wounded and displeased. He will punish you severely, I don't doubt. It's not what he would approve of. He has always been very correct and strict in his behavior . . . Joseph. He brought you up so carefully. I remember quite well how he whipped you for missing Sunday School . . . oh, yes, very severely! And I gave you Hooker to make you feel happier . . . and now *you* are making us all unhappy and uncomfortable . . .'

Miss Abbey fell to crying, not very sincerely, but because she could think of nothing more to say and felt the need of a climax.

Sophie and Little John had been glaring at each other during her speech. Now John, white and harder of feature than he had ever been before, turned on his heel and went quickly downstairs. Like a tremulous shadow, Miss Anna followed him. She stopped him in the hall.

'Don't tell her anything about it, Johnnie. Don't frighten the poor little thing. She is very happy. It ought to be a happy, happy day . . . A cousin of mine over in Camden has a nice room. I'll take her over there. Oh, dear, will her parents be angry with her, do you think? Your Aunt Abbey

will certainly get Miss Lex to write a letter to your papa . . . perhaps to hers. There will be such dreadful angry talk. Poor little rash happy thing. I wish I could do something to stop them.' She twisted her limp and limber hands. 'They say such dreadful things when they get started . . . about young and pretty women . . . and once they begin talking they never stop . . .'

John was mastered by fear. He heard the tongues shrieking at little Lydia, and saw the fingers pointing. His father would speak of her as he had spoken of Susan Jay . . . unbearably. The Fanes would suspect him, John, of horrible seductions and betrayals. She would be lost . . . he with her . . . they might be divided, punished. He came to one of those plunging and unalterable decisions, caught at it, as Joseph in an agony of doubt and scruple, had caught at his great brass-bound ruler.

'Miss Annie,' he said, 'we'll take her to your cousin's room in Camden . . . that's in New Jersey, isn't it? It's where people go when they want . . . I'm going to get a license and a clergyman. Can you lend me twenty . . . forty . . . dollars? I'm going to marry Lydia to-night.'

CHAPTER XXI

A DRAMA SCRAPPED

JOSEPH GREGORY closed his day's record in the Journal and Account Book:

'Reports of John from Philadelphia exceedingly satisfactory. Paid Samuel Lavender for week's tutoring, \$25.00 in full. Visited doctor. Pain in back. Examination necessary. Day fair and mild. Thermometer 62.'

He looked from the page, unseeingly, out through the larch trees at the scarlet thin-lipped smile of that mild fair day now nearly ended. Joseph had rarely felt less anxious, more secure. There, he knew, was John, safely imprisoned behind the gray spinsterly walls of Abbey's Philadelphia house where youth with its temptations could by no means intrude upon the patient and wholesome treadmill of labor, nourishment, and rest. The father could readily surmise, with a reckoning eye on the clock, that John would be, at such or such an hour, over his books, at sober supping with his aunt, or on his dutiful drowsy way to bed.

Lavender's last report lay on the desk beside him . . . 'You need have no fear of John's injuring himself by over-application. He is a patient student, but has none of the nervous overstraining ambition which in certain cases brings about a breakdown. His eight hours a day of application are for this emergency by no means too many and he can keep up the pace indefinitely, I think. The walk to and from my house is exercise enough. He looks pale certainly and seems to me a trifle underweight, but that is only natural. As he accustoms himself to the routine, its effects will be less noticeable. Nothing could be better for him than the quiet of his present home, where early to bed, early to rise is the rule, simple and wholesome food is provided, and where there are none of those heady distractions so injurious to youth.'

'Youth,' repeated Joseph, still looking at that secret scarlet smile beyond the larch-tree branches. The word brought to his fancy always the vision of a light Greek figure piping and dancing under an early morning sky . . . some picture he had seen when he was a child, perhaps. Joseph himself had never had the slightest impulse to run out into the dew and pipe dawn into the sky . . . but Youth was to him, for all his inexperience of its exultation, an allegorical regret . . . something beautifully and uselessly gay, which he must somewhere unwittingly have lost, a gaudy toy, regrettable but dangerous . . .

The sound of wheels on his gravel drive banished the dancing figure, Crool's unmistakable 'Whoa there, you Dan, whoa boy!' Milly's feet padding excitedly past his study door, and then, surely . . . was it not? . . . the voice of John and another, swift and sweet, a girl's voice in the Homestead hall.

Joseph, with his heart and his face of disaster, rose, but before he could reach the study door it opened and seemed to his startled observation to be occupied by a pair of blue audacious eyes.

'Don't be angry with John, Mr. Gregory,' a voice spoke for the eyes, accompanying them, interpreting their blueness and audacity; 'it was all my fault . . . hush, John! . . . I went to Philadelphia myself and . . . married him.'

Joseph, above the tumult of his outraged brain, stood still and collected into vision the scared pale face of Little John somewhere above those disastrous blue eyes.

'Married . . .' whispered Joseph calamitously; 'married? John?'

'We've been to see my father and mother,' Lydia rushed on, holding back John who had set down his suitcase and was stammering, 'Er — er — er —' 'and they've been just lovely about it. They quite understand . . . and it was really Miss Abbey's fault because she wouldn't have me in the house and there was nowhere else for me to go . . . and we love each other and' . . . looking at him, the blue eyes

began to harden . . . 'if you don't want us, we can go to my father. He'd do anything for me and he loves John and, anyway, we can manage very well by ourselves. John will get into Mr. Nathaniel Hands's office. But we would so like you to be . . . nice . . . and happy.'

Pride faltered. Lydia came forward and put her hands against the breast of Joseph's coat. Standing so, she searched his face as it had never been searched before. It was all disarranged and wan . . . still straining out at John.

'You are . . . married? Married? John?'

He then looked wildly down at Lydia and tried feebly to free himself of her. 'But . . . it isn't possible . . . you have not the means!'

Here Lydia flung herself bodily against him, thrust her face down into his waistcoat, and burst into a desperate passion of tears. It was not so much grief as exasperation, as a climax of excitement and fatigue . . . Better to cry upon this terrible man than to slap him . . . both impulses were quite sincere.

Joseph took two steps backwards and sat down . . . Lydia simply letting herself fall on top of him. Being a man and not without memory or instinct, Joseph's arms came round her. How soft and confiding was the feel of her in her abandonment to his mercy. Above Lydia's head, soft as golden silk under his chin, for she had snatched off her hat and flung it down . . . Joseph met John's eye.

'Lydia,' John stammered half sternly, 'stop . . . get up . . .'

Joseph's face flushed and his arms tightened.

'Come, come, John,' he said, 'don't speak to her like that. She's frightened. Lydia . . . Lydia Fane . . . My dear, you mustn't cry. I am not so terrible. We shall get it all straightened out . . . There must be some misunderstanding. . . '

'No, Papa, we're married,' said John pitilessly.

'John! John! Lydia, my dear, don't cry . . . It is quite . . . correct? that is, I mean, respectable, a license, the sanction of the Church? . . . My son! My son!'

'Miss Farralee was with us. It was in Camden. Of course, Papa, I mean . . . quite right, you know . . .'

'I don't understand. I have been kept in the dark. It is . . . a terrible shock. You have not the means to marry. How has it come about? Stop crying, my dear child, look up . . . we can straighten things out, perhaps . . . look up . . .'

'I don't dare,' sobbed Lydia, 'your face is so terrible . . . I don't dare look at it.'

Considering the fact that she lay bodily against him, in his arms, this fear of looking up into his face sounded a note of comedy even to Joseph's ear, and quite involuntarily he laughed. To John at this moment in that study where he had rarely seen any but the more fearful aspects of paternity, the laugh seemed a miracle, as though the sun had flashed up again behind the larch trees. At sound of it, Lydia did raise her head.

'You darling!' she said and kissed Joseph on the mouth.

And with that, Joseph's drama was incontinently scrapped. Of course, during these past bewildering ten minutes, he had been spinning himself a splendid rôle. He was not really so overwhelmed, for Lydia was a gentlewoman of good family, not without prospects, and had been forgiven and accepted by her parents . . . things might easily have been . . . he had always feared they would be . . . very much worse . . . so he had rapidly arranged a scheme of conduct . . . a period of profound prostration, result of shock, a time of bitter upbraiding and reproach, during which John would be brought to a condition of abject dependence and remorse and his fellow criminal be profoundly humiliated and subjected . . . when all this had been duly performed, then . . . and not till then, he would reassure and forgive them. There would be a beautiful scene . . . he would offer them the shelter of his roof, his protection, his fatherly affection. Now, because of his laugh and Lydia's kiss, he had to hasten to his climax with mortifying abruptness. Whole acts were demolished, long monologues destroyed . . .

'Indeed,' he said, 'I am far from knowing yet how much

... that is ... I have to overlook, and to condone. You say your parents ... I must see them, talk to them. They must, I fear, have conceived a very poor opinion of you, John ...'

'They love him!' Lydia cried.

'But even so ... John is in no position to support a wife ... This house is yours ... We shall manage, I dare say ... Time will show the consequences of this rash, improvident step ... but first, John, I must have a strict accounting from you. You must be open and above-board. I must write to Aunt Abbey. Nothing must be concealed. It is difficult for me to believe. You are both so young. I hope it is all proper, all correct ... we must go over the papers. Very distressing to me, of course ... naturally ... a shock. Married. Tchk! Tchk! But ... there, there, Lydia! John is to blame, John is much to blame. Better take her upstairs, John ... into the guest-room. Yes, there is a doubt — that is, more accommodations for you. Tell Milly to make it up ... that is, to prepare it. After you have shown Lydia the room and made her comfortable, you may come back to me here. We will have our accounting together ... just you and I. We shall have to consider the gravity of this step which you have so rashly made ... ill-considered — Afterwards, we will go together to the Fanes. Everything must be made clear, accounted for, discussed.'

They went out into the hall, John went at the immediate prospect of that accounting, and Lydia started before them up the stairs. A few steps above, she paused and looked down, to reassure her young husband. The light shone on her hair and on her naughty sidelong pagan face. There had been nothing like her in the Homestead before, but she became its sober dimness, its old dark staircase, its seclusion, as a cardinal becomes a pine.

From somewhere above her a voice spoke, Hooker coldly greeting this intruder.

'Thou shalt have none other gods but me.'

Lydia gave a cry, then her face broke into sparkles of amused relief.

'That blessed parrot! How he made me jump.' She lifted up her voice to mock him. 'Thou shalt have none other gods but me!' cried Lydia.

The two Gregorys standing below her in the hall exchanged a glance of sudden grave collusion. Even in the mouth of a parrot that commandment was no laughing matter, no fit subject for a woman's mockery.

'Thou shalt have none other gods but me . . .' Lydia, said the dark anxious Gregory eyes, must learn.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BLACK MASS

IN the history of most men and women there is written a chapter, sometimes only a phrase or two, in an alien tongue. It is set down there in interruption of the main thread of the plot, an annotation, undecipherable. Such a hieroglyph in Nicholas's life remained forever the brief and tragic episode of his marriage with Barbara Clay: that marriage undertaken on his part with a sort of deliberate desperation, a symbol of his surrender to the necessities of normal living.

He had called it a Black Mass, but it was celebrated that winter in contrast to a recent Gregory marriage of two distraught young lovers before a Camden pastor, with all the beauty possible to the whitest mass of life: beauty of flowers and music, of intoned ritual and candlelight. The violin sang its ecstatic benediction, the old downtown New York church made a wine-dark background to white figures and white flowers, a choir chanted of that 'perfect love all human thought transcending' and prayed melodiously in the high unearthly voices of little boys that 'theirs may be the love that knows no ending whom Thou for evermore hath joined in one' . . . 'Nothing so lovely,' said a weeping Clay, 'as a young marriage. Aren't they too exquisite?' Clays and Gregorys were moved by the carved and shining beauty of Nicholas's face and the rose-flushed delicacy of Barbara's.

The honeymoon was spent in Florida, Mrs. Johnnie Pierrepont-Mount magnanimously lending the young pair her yacht for a month's cruise, and Martin as magnanimously presenting his junior partner with a month's holiday.

If only the honeymoon and Barbara's power of torment and assuagement might have lasted! Nicholas, enslaved, was capable of earthly raptures and Barbara's pleasure lay in the tyrannies, the cruelties and the belated mercies of her

profession, but . . . but . . . like the Cinderella robe at midnight, the garment of Nicholas's passion fell swiftly from him and Barbara's ascendancy was done. The abject beggary, the vivid and touching aspects of a hungry lover, the sensitiveness, the tremulous dependence upon her smile, her touch, the easy and always imminent probability of storm, of quarrels and reconciliations, all the delicious drama of passion which made the life and the zest of life to Barbara, were dead and buried beyond resurrection before three months were out. Nicholas, true to his temperament, had thoroughly celebrated his Black Mass and now so soon tasted satiety. It seemed to him that his soul had gone blank and his eyes blind.

He went about his treadmill of business and of marriage with the face of a slave, smiling because it was necessary to content his masters, making merry with the old crowd of his wife's New York friends because such was the desire of his young mistress. In fact, he had become the marionette, all the strings pulled and his arms and legs, his head and lips and eyes and tongue, kicked, danced, jerked, nodded, and moved to nimble perfection. Never in his small world had he been so applauded, Angela, his mother, Martin, acclaimed like a prodigal returned the composed worldling and the rigidly regular young man of business. It was extraordinary, said Martin, how quickly Nicholas had learned to 'know the ropes,' how clever, in particular, he was in handling men, Angela reported a gradual dropping of undesirable acquaintances, while Carrie noted that Hesther Anne and Creek Kaaterskill were no longer visited. During the week, Nicholas kept his nose to the grindstone; over the week-ends he visited Barbara's friends. Outwardly the life of Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Gregory was the ideal union of two wealthy, healthy, and wise young Americans; but inwardly . . .

'Barb,' suggested Nicholas, 'I wish you'd cut out the Barclays. It's their parties that do you up every time. That Simon is a rotter. He's making love to you.'

'Why shouldn't he?' demanded Barbara. '*You don't.*'

They were dressing for dinner . . . and the month was April, the fourth month since their wedding. Nicholas was going into the city, for once alone, to a dinner given by one of his classmates, a small Princeton reunion. Barbara, complaining of a headache, seemed glad to stay at home with Caroline and Martin. She was in a ruffled and lacy negligee and looked a wicked little witch with her big angry eyes and tightened lips between two dense masses of black hair. Nicholas, in his starched white evening shirt and broadcloth trousers, came over from his mirror to where she stood by the little fire — they were still in Nicholas's old rooms pending the rapid building of their own house on Martin's other hill — and put his arms around her.

'Barbara, I wish I made you happier. You're discontented with me already . . . aren't you?'

Barbara stood in his arms, let herself fall into softness and waited with every nerve alert for an answering flame, a violence. It was not there. The strong young body of her husband was steady, kind, and pitiful. She drew herself out of his embrace and sat down on a little bench before the fire with her small chin in her hands. In this position her face was hidden from Nicholas. It was pinched and white and withered. Her big eyes held the dancing flames shattered by tears.

Nicholas, whistling softly, unaware of her sudden young agony, went back to his dressing-table and brushed his polished head.

'You will, won't you, dear?' he asked.

'Will . . . what?' her dry small voice returned.

'Cut out the Barclays . . . Simon and his parties. You don't look well . . . cocktails and champagne play the devil with you. I hate to see you' . . . he hesitated and the color flooded his face . . . 'the way you were last night.'

Barbara neither blushed nor winced. She laughed shortly.

'In the old days I've seen you very much the way I was last night.'

He stood frowning miserably enough in the middle of the room, ready to go now, a perfect and impeccable image of the social male. 'I feel somehow as if it was my fault, Barb. What can I do?'

He turned to her a pair of suddenly desperate eyes.

'You can't do anything,' she answered, still staring into the small fire. 'The Clays are all like that . . . Look at my grandfather . . . and Uncle Rodney. Go on . . . to your party . . . you'll be late.'

He made a small sound of pain and protest, stood helplessly looking down at her, and went out.

No sooner had he gone than Barbara took off her negligee, snatched from the closet a golden dancing-frock and began to dress with an attention to detail which was certainly excessive for a quiet evening at home with Caroline. There was a little party that night at Simon Barclay's. She had suddenly a mind to go to it. He had told her that if she'd 'phone, he'd send a car out for her. She would tell Nicholas later . . . let him beat her if he liked. Ah, if he only would: anger, violence, anything would be preferable to that unvarying cool sweetness.

Barbara knew and acknowledged to herself that for her present predicament she was alone to blame. Deliberately she had trapped the queer 'different' boy, had inflamed him against his will, had forced him to ask her in marriage and had surprised him by a premature announcement into fulfilling his obligation to her. Indeed, he might have avenged himself in a fashion more violent and deliberate. She had caused him, she very well knew, during the brief day of her power, incalculable and exquisite suffering. Clever Barbara, wrenching her lips to a smile, acknowledged that she now got what she deserved. And Nicholas did not even know what he was doing to her! Merely he had won back his old detachment, his serenity, the empire of his soul. It was her turn to suffer. Perhaps, in time, she might be able to reverse the pattern. Then she would know better than to give him what he wanted. She ground her little hard square

teeth together in the darkness of Simon's limousine. Ah, she would, she would *then* know better how to hold Nicholas! Or, if she had already and forever, which considering his youth seemed an impossibility . . . lost the power greatly to move him to desire . . . there were other powers, poisonous and potent, by which she could bring him to her heel. Jealousy, and pride, for instance, dignity. Nicholas, even with his cool sweet smiling, was vulnerable. She could subdue him . . . if only as a husband, as . . . she laughed scornfully . . . a Gregory. After all she was married to him. He was honorable, sensitive, generous . . . a gentleman. She had him rather completely, rather, when she came to think about it, horribly in her power.

The great cold glow of the city rose up before the advancing automobile and shone through the glass into her eyes. They were dry and brilliant and greedy with their purpose.

It was not very late when, splendid, redolent of smoke and wine, and hoarse with masculine self-expression, Nicholas came down the steps of his classmate's New York home to the pavement. It was a side-street rather far uptown, and except for a few waiting cabs and carriages and his departing fellow diners, it was even at this early hour empty enough. A limousine swung into it from the brighter avenue and ran smoothly to a stop before hesitating Nicholas. From the limousine a head thrust itself out.

'Hop in, Nicholas,' said Barbara's voice, a trifle thicker than usual, blurred. 'I've come to take you home.'

Nicholas, surprised, but acquiescent, got in, closed the door and examined the contents of the car: behind the wheel and at his side, Barbara, bright-eyed, showing no headache symptoms, the fur collar of her wrap fallen from the thin white shoulder, while behind in the back seat he made out, while he greeted them, Simon Barclay's horse-face, and the Neal Hutchinsons', Maisie's narrow and white, with her long sleepy eyes, and Neal's, round and red and puckered with an expression half-lachrymose, half-humorous.

'Hope your party was as good as mine,' chuckled Simon. 'It wasn't . . . he looks too sober.'

'Aren't you pleased with your thoughtful wife, Nikko? I wanted to surprise you. I broke up Simon's party early, for I knew yours wouldn't be late, and I've been telephoning to find out when you would be through. We're going to take you home. Simon sent out for me and I promised to carry him and his little friends out with me for country air. They can stay over Sunday, I suppose. Your mother is always awfully good about things. Isn't this car of Simon's a wonder? My, how I love it! Feel how it holds the road, Nicholas. I just had to run it.'

Nicholas, having performed the necessary courtesies to Simon and the Hutchinsons, thanked Barbara for picking him up and . . . fell silent. He was angry with her for so swiftly ignoring his request. He smelled cocktails on her breath. She had been drinking . . . but then, he told himself, so had he. They were leaving the city and Barbara increased her speed.

'Slow on the towns, Barb,' Simon advised, 'as you go up the river. They're getting darned particular.'

'Who's running this car, "Legree"?' she retorted. But she seemed to be taking his caution to heart, for she diminished her speed very perceptibly as they came through the first hamlet. The Hutchinsons, their host, and Barbara kept up a fire of chatter which, having to do with the earlier events of the evening . . . events which had suggested the removal of festivities to country air . . . Nicholas could not follow. He became gradually absorbed in a confused realization of his fate, which had so swiftly marched upon him and which he had with so cool a precipitancy embraced, that it had hardly even yet fallen into the perspectives of reality. Now, wakened, perhaps, by the evening's freedom, its masculine detachment, the Nicholas he had been put out a numb hand and laid hold of the Nicholas he had recently become. It seemed to some inner observer, who was neither Nicholas, that here was an intimate and terrifying incompatibility

beside which the incongruities of marriage were almost insignificant. He had not killed that other Nicholas; he was coming to life again, hungry for his stars, and, being himself incapable of suffering, he would search his yoked fellow, the rubber factory, Barbara-mated Nicholas with a red-hot tool of inquisition. Nicholas kept himself from restless movements on the seat, by tightening his arms across his chest, biting his lips and staring out at the white circle of light that bored its way ahead of them, devouring road and trees and sky, sucking into vision and out of it again, a caterpillar world. Freedom, wasn't that, after all, what he had sacrificed? Freedom to follow the essential urgings of his spirit . . . ? But wasn't it what all men sacrificed to life? He half-closed his eyes, the light came to him on slanting rays. It reminded him of something, a star he used to look at through his little bedroom window down there on Maple Lane when he was a boy . . . a queer half-memory followed . . . was it of a dream? . . . a vast plain with straight blank rocks stuck up and himself running and writing on them with yellow chalk, but always pursued by a great and shining cloud . . .

He must have been half asleep in Simon's car, for he came to himself only at the climax of the event. Barbara was running not very fast along the main street of a town, brightly lighted, the pavements crowded, some show was just coming out. She was talking over her shoulder, and Nicholas, in his half-somnolence, had yet the vague impression of a dislocation in her movements and her sentences as though her will did not quite connect with her nerves and muscles . . . Beside the car a voice shrilled suddenly, 'Come back here, Lily . . . ' The car swerved and Nicholas, seeing reality, saw at the same instant a child, standing, it seemed to him, quite safely near the curb . . . only just on the edge of the street, and upon this little obediently still figure, blinking like an owl at the lights, Barbara bore down, incomprehensibly, horribly.

There was a piercing cry, two cries, the car jounced. Bar-

bara, screaming too, backed madly. Another jounce. Right in front of them there on the cobbles lay a little dirty crumpled something on which a woman had thrown herself with moans and clutching hands.

A policeman came up out of the earth, everywhere angry and horrified life came running, humming, shouting. Nicholas drew Barbara from her place and slipped into her seat. When the policeman's light searched above the steering-wheel, it fell upon his white face and shining eyes.

'That child is stone dead,' said the policeman, sharp and stern, his young face shocked to a steady pallor. Barbara went down in a huddle with her hands over her ears. 'I seen you run square into it. You're drunk . . . that's what you are.'

He took Nicholas by the arm as he climbed out, removing his hat with his free hand, and accompanied him to the body of Barbara's victim, now surrounded by a shocked and angry crowd.

'Ambulance comin'. You can't do nothing,' muttered the policeman, already influenced by Nicholas's magic, though the young man had said not a word and looked down stonily enough, it seemed, though the policeman felt him shaking, at the child and its grief-distracted mother. 'Better get back into your car. I'll take you round to the station.' He thrust back a man who attempted to lay hands on Nicholas.

'Your friends will be wanted as witnesses.'

'They saw me run her down,' said Nicholas, speaking for the first time in his clear cool voice, 'Mr. Barclay here and Mr. and Mrs. Hutchinson.' He caught from the back seat their frightened and comprehending eyes. 'They can tell you. I must have been . . . more under the influence of liquor than I thought I was . . .'

'That kid was well out of your way. First you swerved and then you just turned your car and ran straight at her, charged her . . . like . . . Drunk or crazy or just out to kill in cold blood . . . that's how it looked. No possible excuse. They'll take your names at the station.'

'My name is Nicholas Gregory.'

'Keep your information for the Justice. You'll need every cent of your money, young man, to get you out of this. It ought to be manslaughter, but they'll call it accidental killing, I guess. You'll be let off with a fine and the costs. I think, myself, it ought to be a hanging matter. Kids aren't safe.'

Barbara made a strangled sound. Nicholas put his hand on her. 'Be quiet, Barbara, you'll be home in a few minutes. That's all you have to do now . . . be quiet.'

Simon took the wheel and, with the policeman on the running-board, directed the great machine at a snail's pace through the little humming town. That 'young gentleman' in the back seat, white and collected in his evening dress, that monster from a giant juggernaut, who had stood stonily above the raving mother and the little crushed body of his victim . . . was an excellent object for mob hatred and mob vengeance.

'I'll be glad to get ye all there with a hull skin,' muttered the policeman nervously.

The world in 1907 was not so inured to automobile accidents as it has since become, neither had the laws fixing accountability and decreeing penalties arrived at their present necessary rigor. Nicholas in 1925 would have been tried for manslaughter and no doubt have been made to serve a prison sentence. As it was he got off with a very heavy fine and a tongue-lashing, published at length in all the newspapers, so shrewd that, guiltless as he knew himself to be, the young man whitened and shrank and bent his face from its brutalities.

Psychologically, perhaps, the punishment then was more severe than now. The general horror was more articulate and prolonged, and, since the law did not sufficiently condemn, public opinion took the condemnation on itself. In headlines, on street-corners, and at dinner tables, Nicholas daily for many more than the proverbial nine days was tried,

and convicted, for manslaughter. There was so little excuse for him. The little creature, half dead with fatigue and drowsiness, had nevertheless stopped obediently at its mother's command close to the curb. Young Gregory had turned his machine straight at her and run her down and then backed over the body. There was something peculiarly horrible, almost demoniac in his stony and unrealizing loss of sanity and of control. He must have been completely dazed with drink, though gossip said he had left the dinner apparently sober. Besides, there was his record. He had only just escaped being expelled from Princeton during his senior year. Every story Angela had garnered for Caroline's anxious ear and Ripley, for the eager ears of his acquaintances, was now dished up with garnishings. Pictures of Nicholas with his little victim appeared on the front pages of the newspapers. There was grave editorial comment and the hysterical outcry of correspondents. Nicholas received a mound of threatening and insulting letters.

What Caroline and Martin suffered may readily be imagined. The little woman looked old, Martin lost his ruddy color and his solid flesh grew wrinkled and slack. But on no one did the accident and its consequences press with such a deadly weight as upon Barbara. For a fortnight she was hysterical, delirious, desperately ill. Afterwards she was sent away to California with her sister, Mary Clay, and a trained nurse. Nicholas would not go. He stayed . . . to work. He went to and fro from Rosewreath to the factory and back, and spent the nights in his bedroom wakeful or sleeping, no one knew. He neither sought nor avoided sympathy or insult.

To Joseph, Nicholas seemed 'callous' . . . 'He was — er — it seemed to me . . . almost absent-minded, when I questioned him about the accident . . .'

Lydia drew in her breath. 'Did you . . . question him?' Her face winced. 'I'm afraid to look into his eyes,' she said. 'I know that if you photographed them, you'd find a picture in them . . . of that child.'

CHAPTER XXIII

A CHRISTENING

IN July of 1907, Joseph Gregory became a grandfather. Be sure that the Journal and Account Book was cognizant. In exquisite writing, blue ink underlined with red, there stands this entry:

'Born this morning to my son John and his wife Lydia, my first grandchild, to be named after me, Joseph Israel Gregory, a fine male baby, weighing ten pounds. Mother and child doing well. Doctor, nurse, attendance all expenses paid by me in full. \$300.00. Weather very sultry. Ther. 82°.'

A few weeks later, there was held at the old Gregory Homestead a christening.

The arrangements for this ceremony had not been made without some friction and a good deal of controversy. In the first place, Lydia did not want to invite Miss Abbey Gregory. 'I despise that old woman,' she said. To her young husband's secret terror, Lydia made no change for Joseph's benefit in the manner or matter of her speaking. The wind of her frankness was never tempered to the shorn lamb of his timid spirit. In fact, his intercourse with Lydia was the first contact with unvarnished and unveiled reality which Joseph's life had permitted him for twenty years or more. The effect upon him was visible and to Little John disconcerting. Since the rash marriage Joseph had become increasingly nervous, jumpy, excited, alternately generously elated and morbidly depressed. He 'trembled' for the future of his son, he did not know what was 'to become' of this gay singing laughing girl, with no stability, no really solid foundations to her character. 'Flighty' was his synonym for her fearlessness. There were other adjectives he used for her, 'imprudent,' 'giddy,' and 'improvident,' but

one, always in his heart if never on his lips, visible, however, to Lydia in his anxious and conscientious eyes, was . . . 'darling.'

Her speech about Miss Abbey sent Joseph, perturbed and angry, from the breakfast table. Lydia was down for the first time, wan, her eyes as dim and sweet as violets under the drooping lids, the 'badness' of her face subdued to the seriousness of motherhood.

Joseph cried 'Tchk! Tchk!' and because there was no brass-edged ruler to grasp at and because he dared not show his outraged sense of ancestor-worship to this delicate child so recently the mother of a new Joseph, he crumpled up his napkin and pushed away his plate, and, while Johnnie stammered, 'She doesn't mean quite that, Papa, she doesn't mean she really despises Aunt Abbey,' he turned upon his son.

'An old lady,' he stuttered, 'your great-aunt . . . I mean . . . it seems to me . . . she took you under the shelter of her roof . . . that is . . . she was always especially generous to you . . . and indulgent. She gave you Hooker —'

'I bet she wanted to get rid of him,' said Lydia, and Joseph flung back his chair and hurried out of the room.

'But I'm not going to invite Aunt Abbey,' said Lydia. 'I just know that Joey wouldn't like to have her.'

In the second place, there was the knotty matter of Joseph Gregory's godparents.

'Hesther Anne must be godmother, of course.'

This second controversy took place in the young parents' bedroom. It was twilight. Lydia lay near the open window with her baby in her arms. John began to walk up and down the room.

'But, Lydia darling, Uncle Martin and Mr. Hunt, you know . . .'

Lydia opened her eyes and sat up straighter. 'What's that got to do with me and Hesther Anne and Joey? If any godmother can get my child a reserved seat in Heaven . . . it's Hesther Anne.'

'Y-yes. But . . . the family, you know.'

'Family!' Lydia repeated with a laugh which was distinctly Fane, not Gregory, in key and pitch. 'How silly you all are! Hesther Anne is my friend and the only Christian I know . . . And you needn't look at me with those great wounded eyes, my dear, because you are not a Christian. You worship your ancestors, beginning with your Papa. Family,' said Lydia, 'be . . . blessed.'

A moment later, Johnnie having removed the wounded eyes and remained tactfully silent, she added with a sweet and dreamy look of compassion, 'And I'm going to ask Nicholas to be godfather.'

'Oh, Lydia, not on top of this . . . this thing!'

'Just because of this thing. If we choose him to be Joey's godfather, people will know that we don't think him such a monster. You can't imagine how I feel about Nicholas and that disgusting wife of his running away to California and leaving him to face it alone . . . all these months . . . April, May, June, July. Isn't she ever coming back to him? And Nicholas of all people . . . so sweet and sunny and . . . untouched.'

'It's rotten, isn't it?' John's face was moved. 'But we have to think of Joey too. It's not a very happy choice of godfathers for him, is it? I love Nicholas, but . . . do you suppose as time goes on people will forget? Just now, you know, Lydia, he might as well . . . the way he is talked and written about . . . I mean . . . be a convicted murderer. Er . . . a striped suit couldn't make him more horribly conspicuous.'

'All the more reason why I'd like people to see him with Joey in his arms. I want Nicholas to hold him . . . Please, Johnnie!'

In the end a compromise was effected. Miss Abbey Gregory was invited to the christening and Hesther Anne and Nicholas were asked to be Joey's godparents. Abbey declined the invitation in a sweetly insulting letter and Nicholas explained his own refusal to Lydia.

'I don't think the world would consider Joey safe . . . in my arms,' he said, looking straight at her with the eyes she was afraid to examine. 'And I don't want to be published in the same column with him. It's his introduction to civilized society and he ought to be worthily sponsored.' Lydia put her hand on his and he smiled at her.

'You're a dear to want me,' he said, 'I know just how your mind worked . . . it's a darned nice mind too. I'll be his godfather incog. May I? He's awfully sweet with all that hair . . . looks like you, Lydia.'

'No,' she said firmly, 'except for his hair, he's the living breathing image of Little John, and I think' — she made use of her naughty sidelong look — 'I think there's just a little something in his face . . . just a faint shadowy look of . . . Hooker.' She giggled deliciously, and Nicholas, for the first time in many weeks, laughed spontaneously aloud.

On the day of the christening, immediately after the newly consecrated soldier of Christ was returned sobbing gently and snuffily to Lydia's arms, she moved deliberately to Nicholas where he stood as far away as the limits of the Homestead parlor would allow, and handed to him Joseph Israel Gregory, Jr. He could not, without dropping it, refuse the burden, so, flushing deeply, he took it and held it carefully, looking down.

Every one in the room, Gregorys, Bitterings, and Fanes, had turned to watch Lydia's impulsive movement and now watched Nicholas. His back was to the western window and the late sunshine fell on the infant's fair little fuzzy pate, giving it a tiny misty halo. It had stopped its wriggling and snuffling and lay still. Nicholas smiled down at it.

'Saint Anthony of Padua,' said Angus Fane.

Martin, standing beside Fane, had never heard of Saint Anthony of Padua and did not know Murillo's picture, but with a painful contraction of his throat he recognized something in Nicholas's attitude, his reverence, thrilling when one recalled his dreadful recent experience, for the little living bundle in his arms, the slight touch of asceticism, of

remoteness in his carriage, in the very sweetness of his bent and patient face.

'By God,' thought Martin angrily, 'he's just a . . . kid. He oughtn't to look like that . . .'

Hesther Anne had turned away and was fingering some music on the top of the piano. It was she who saw Milly beckoning anxiously from the door just back of Joseph. She went over.

'What is it, Milly?'

Milly whispered, 'A telegram for Mr. Nicholas, Miss. I couldn't help readin' it, Missy, please to forgive me, but it's been sent down from Mr. Martin's house where they opened it . . . one of them menservants . . . there ain't no envelope. Gawd, Miss, I wisht you'd look it over before you hand it to any of the fambly. It's awful, Miss. Oh, Miss, it's bad.'

Hesther unfolded and read the yellow slip.

Prepare for terrible news. Barbara walked in front of truck San Francisco. Killed instantly. Had just sent unknown to me a statement to newspapers acknowledging responsibility for April accident. Doctors here think her mind unhinged by shock and long repression of truth. Heart-broken. Come at once.

MARY CLAY.

At this moment Saint Anthony of Padua looked up from his light burden and, meeting Hesther's eyes, smiled not very certainly.

BOOK III
THE SPEECHLESS GOD

BOOK III

THE SPEECHLESS GOD

CHAPTER I

A PATCHWORK QUILT SIX YEARS IN THE MAKING

IN spite of all prohibitions, paternal, maternal, and grandfatherly, little Joseph Israel Gregory, Jr., would persist in teasing Hooker. Were the door of that venerable bird's sanctuary, now the old study, shut and locked, then would Joey, his tongue in his cheek, come wriggling in through one of its shrouded windows and, ruddy and yellow-haired against the sober dimness, he would place himself before the cage and taunt its occupant.

'How's weligion to-day?' Joey would demand insultingly.

Hooker, waking from the thoughtful nap of maturity, would scratch his head and waste no word on the intruder.

'Say somefin 'bout God or commits,' Joey would suggest, and, looking uneasily over his shoulder, would poke a twig at Hooker.

The parrot danced and screamed.

'You're so weligious. Let me learn you "Now I lay me."'

There would follow, with chastisements of pokes and twig-lashings about his bars, a repetition of 'Now I lay me' to the thousandth time, Hooker hysterical and Joey with what Lydia called his 'Pro-Fane' dimples slashing the correct little Gregory face, the yellow monkey-lights in his soft spaniel eyes.

Usually it was Joseph Gregory, Sr., who, roused from bed, where now his long hesitant malady, always about to yield to treatment, but never yielding, kept him, would come in carpet-slippers and dressing-gown and skull-cap to the door

and, unlocking it, stand there, gaunt and serious and sallow, his gray side-whiskers framing the mournful and anxious affection of his faded eyes.

'That you, Gwandpa?' would Joey say cordially after the first horrid start, 'I didn't see you tum in. You scared me all to pieces.'

'Are you allowed in my study, Joseph?'

'I thought Hooker must be lonely, Gwandpa.'

Grandpa would glance furtively over his shoulder.

'Is your mother out?' he would hopefully inquire.

Only once had Joey been incautious enough to say 'yes' and the resultant catastrophe in his relations with his grandpa had been unforgettable. It was then that Joey had flung the ruler out of the window and that John had arrived from the New York office just in time to save his father from a complete physical collapse. A starfish imbued with the pride and energy of Lucifer is not an easy animal to spank.

If unable to decide whether to be more Fane or Gregory in his physical get-up, Joey had become without doubt the frail Gregory receptacle for a strong new temperamental wine. He was subject to sudden and acute small illnesses, more alarming to witness than painful to experience. Though he spoke in the soft slow speech of Little John, what he said had none of the tender reasonableness of his father's early speeches, and he was given to quite un-Little John-ish fits of hysterical laughter, loud importunate grief and rages that turned him into a clawing biting little beast. And he seemed incapable of ready obedience or of respect, he was impertinent, meddling, and destructive, the darling of Fane-and Gregory-dom, but its plague, as well as the battle-ground for the divergent wills of John and Lydia.

Little John the Censor, blinded and muted by the first rapture of knowing himself beloved, had long since come into office again and set himself once more to the task of shaping Lydia into a white-robed figure walking amongst orderly blue flowers. That an inner Little John vastly pre-

ferred Lydia as she was, laughing and sidelong and impertinent, running about the upstairs rooms insufficiently clothed, careless of censorship or of opinion, speaking the unvarnished fact, writing impious verses and indulging her fancy in unimaginably daring 'idears' . . . only made the Censor, outer John, the more exacting. John believed that he liked a certain kind of woman, what the world calls a 'nice woman,' and that he didn't really like a 'nice woman,' but only wanted to fool the world into thinking that he liked one, was a complicated truth which, by training and temperament, he was unable to grasp. He liked Joey too, just as he was, liked him so tenderly with such an aching soft protective fatherliness that the very anguish it caused him to change the least of Joey's dimples into a shadow or to sober down the dancing monkeys in his eyes, made John's conscience wince with shame. He knew that he was spoiling Joey, he agreed with his father that he and Lydia were ruining the boy 'body and soul.' More than once had Lydia snatched her son from the first position of chastisement over his father's reluctant knee. 'I won't have him scared or hurt. I don't want him to grow up afraid.' When John could make himself heard above the grateful perfunctory roaring of his son, who had known from the first that 'Marmee' . . . shouted for 'Come quick . . . Papa is going to spa-ank me . . .' would arrive in time to save him . . . he would say, 'Lydia, he must be made to fear authority. He must be made afraid of disobedience if only for his own safety.'

'Oh, Joey is safe enough,' would Lydia laugh, no merciful warning being given to her, and go forth singing with Joey under her arm to find the cookies of his consolation.

Later, crumbed and dimpled, he would climb up his Papa and ask forgiveness and cover Little John's reluctantly sober face with kisses.

Said Joseph, wagging the long bald narrow head, 'One of these days, you will be sorry, Lydia.'

Other people besides Joseph wagged their heads . . .

When Joey was not able to plague Hooker, he would run away and intrude upon the privacy in a certain golden-walled garden of a certain scientist known to the inverting tongue of Joey as 'Stephen Cousin Hands.' Joey being vaguely cognizant of family history felt that he had a right in that garden.

There was no change in Kaaterskill so remarkable as the change in the management of the little house on Maple Lane. Several years after Lydia's marriage the Fanes had left it, driven reluctantly south by an alarming delicacy of Pepper's chest. Angus had offered the house to Lydia and John and its refusal had been the greatest of Lydia's sacrifices to Gregorydom. Joseph had 'set his foot down.' 'I must set my foot down,' he had said, 'on such preposterous extravagance. You have not the means to keep up a separate establishment. Even rent-free, the house and place are beyond your resources. The salary you are at present receiving, John' . . . John was simply Nathaniel Hands's underpaid and overworked office boy with the privilege of perusing law volumes in moments of leisure, never given . . . John, never ambitious and now merely a commuting cupid, would bring home great tomes and allow himself to be beguiled from them by Joey and Lydia, by love and sleep . . . 'the salary you are at present receiving, though I dare say equivalent to your value, is quite insufficient for such a venture. Though I am willing to assist you and Lydia, I have not . . . that is . . . the wherewithal to furnish you an independence.' In fact, Joseph would have found the Homestead and his invalidism unbearable without the worrying flightiness of Lydia and the outrageousness of her child, without the patient filial devotion of his son. They owed him truly too much to disregard his wishes and they did not even betray their pangs of renunciation . . .

The dear pinkish house with its garden and its apple tree and its enchanting associations! Lydia felt half injured, half assuaged when, startlingly enough, Stephen Hands bought it and all the rough weedy land to the north of it

and built, above a certain place where once a small spectacled repulsive little boy had tried to hang himself, a laboratory for biological research. Now, the passer along Maple Lane could smell tobacco smoke and chemicals above the fragrance of flowers and there scientists foregathered and cracked their hard-shelled jokes and talked their jargon and left their horrid specimens about, and told all manner of unpalatable truths and generally disturbed the ghosts of Lydia's love and Pepper's jollity. Only Joey, like the little love returned, persisted as though drawn by an old influence.

Stephen at the table under the apple tree, the same table where a yellow-haired creature had propped herself to listen to his tutorial wisdom, would start at the sound of a familiar piping, 'Hullo, Stephen Cousin Hands, I thought I'd come to see you.'

'Go away,' Stephen would say, gathering nervously together his sensitive possessions. 'Go home. I'm busy.'

'There's nobody home but Gwandpa and Hooker.'

'Then go back and drive them crazy.'

'I'm not allowed.'

'Are you allowed to drive me crazy?'

'I'm sure you like me, Stephen Cousin. If you say you don't like me, of course I'll go home.'

Stephen would try not to look at Joey, but . . . he would look. And there would stand the creature with his head on one side . . . just as Stephen Cousin feared, with his two great dimples and his dancing monkeys and his tiniest blue trousers in the world and all the rest of it . . . the great spreading mop of sunlit hair, gold as a dandelion . . . something as unforbiddable as June. Then would Stephen, like Joseph and the rest of Joey's world, wag his head and, removing in resignation his eye-glasses, would say, 'You'll never amount to anything, my son, unless your grandpa takes the ruler to you,' and Joey would thereafter receive an enchanting lesson in the uses of a microscope.

All these half-pleasant and half-annoying preoccupations of John's and Lydia's married life, the matter of her tame-

lessness and Joey's discipline, were sharpened into something more sinister by an occasional influence. It came and went under the name of Rick Mercer and it was a small, hard, bright-eyed influence, active and sly and sneering. This gentleman, fifty years old and long divorced, possessed of a small independent property and a small independent brain, was, like Satan, another independent gentleman, tempted by Eden and amused by the disturbance he evidently caused there. He had always been amused by his little Cousin Lydia. He was still amused by her and even more amused by Joey. He liked to poke up the Mercer in this young Fane-Gregory . . . and the Mercer was the darker side of the bright Fane temperament. To understand Little John's hatred of Rick Mercer, it is necessary to quote only one of the latter's speeches. 'The man who invented that phrase "a virtuous woman" at the same instant created that fact the "fallen one."' And, for fuller measure, 'Man made God in his own image and trained Woman to fall down and worship him.' He would make such speeches before Lydia and Joseph, Sr., and before little Jo. Joseph, after the first experience, always kept his bed during Rick's visits. John with more difficulty kept his temper. Joey's morale perceptibly lowered even beyond its usual downward limit after a week-end's encouragement and prompting from Rick Mercer. When Joey indulged in tears and tantrums, Rick would say, 'He's a high-strung little devil. I wouldn't cross him, Johnnie,' or, 'I shouldn't wonder if he had a fever, Lydia. Better put him to bed' . . . this with a taunting eye on helpless Little John.

It was Rick who taught to Joey the value of opportune illnesses, of 'nerves,' and to Lydia the use of a fever thermometer, of which two symptoms John became increasingly and rather morbidly aware.

To tell the truth, Lydia did not so greatly at this time love Rick Mercer and was always glad to see him go, but she was too loyal and too proud to take the part of John's husbandly prejudice against the specimen of her own race.

There was always a quarrel between John and Lydia after Rick had left. And Joey would be sick abed —

Of such patchwork small events and contrary emotions was made the stuff of these six years of John's life before the tragic lesson was set for him . . . a different pattern truly from his Cousin Nicholas's.

CHAPTER II

SIMPSON PRIDE

CAROLINE GREGORY, driven by the pressure of an anxiety, the more unendurable to her temperament because its reason was incomprehensible, was brought step by mental step of surrender to visit Gissing's. One may measure her pride, as well as her sacrifice, by the fact that it took six years of this Spartan endurance of a gnawing fox under her mantle, to worry her to the door of Hesther Anne . . . six years, that is, from the time of Nicholas's tragedy.

She tried first to find Hunt's daughter at the now well-established Day Nursery and, since she was not there, followed the directions of a pretty little girl to the house of Bessie Devinney. The pretty little girl put her hand in Caroline's.

'I'll take you round to see Miss Hetty-Anne,' she said; 'I love to go and see her.'

Looking up through two curls at the lady whose hand was so firm to the feel and yet so fidgety to the grasp, the child had a misgiving that perhaps here was some one who might not love to see Miss Hetty-Anne. Difficult to believe that, in Creek Kaaterskill, where every one so loved to see her.

'It's not far. Have you the rheumatism in your feet, ma'am?'

No. Caroline did not have the rheumatism in her feet but in her pride. Bessie Devinney's house . . . impossible for Martin's wife there to visit Hesther Anne. She took a dime from her purse.

'I'll give you that, Rosy . . . is that your name? . . . if you will go to Miss Hunt and ask her to be good enough to meet me at the Day Nursery . . . or . . . or somewhere else.'

Rosy gave a quaint chirp and skip before she ran. She came back presently, however, rather cast down. 'Miss

Hetty-Anne says she can't see you 'less'n you come to her. She says, ma'am, there ain't nobody home . . . Wouldn't you please to give me the dime, anyways?'

The dime was given silently. Caroline, with her pinched face, her brick-red cheeks and the ladder between her brows, went with quick angry little steps along the dirty street towards Gissing's.

'That there's the house,' said Rosy, and fled, for she began to be afraid of this little tight-bodied woman with a mouth bitten into invisibility. Caroline, fighting the rheumatism of her will, every joint of her spirit creaking, got herself nevertheless up the steps of a clean white porch and knocked.

The door was opened almost instantly by Hesther Anne.

Caroline had often seen Hesther Anne since the quarrel between Martin and Julius Hunt, a breach which had since been practically closed by Nicholas's diplomacy and by the building of a Mission Chapel. She had seen her and talked to her, uncertain awkward exchanges of 'How d'you do?' 'How are you?' but never during all the years had she really looked into the eyes of Hesther Anne with that will to see deep into the soul disguised for mortal recognition as the daughter of Julius Hunt.

Hesther had not very greatly changed since her twentieth year. That aura of excessive life which so radiates, formless, uncontainable, beyond the limitations of baby flesh and blood, enchantingly blurs the outlines of childhood and in early youth narrows to a border of shining fire, seems later to settle itself exactly to the limits of the human face and body, bringing that clear carved steadiness, that fixity which means maturity . . . a body and its powers close welded, of an equal growth. It will shrink, it will draw in deeper and deeper like a contracting spark until far down in the cold empty shabby house it dies, but, for a dozen years or more, it shines, contained, informing, perfectly adapted. Upon Hesther's face at twenty-six, the aura had fitted itself more closely . . . that was all. She was thin, clear-eyed. She wore a pleated skirt of blue-and-white plaid wool and since April

at Kaaterskill is a month of snow-squall and bluebird boastfulness, she had on a knitted 'sweater' over her sheer tucked blouse whose frill lay childishly about her pretty little throat with a flat bow just under her round chin. She looked pretty, Caroline thought, and very 'ladylike.' Sighing, Nicholas's mother admitted that Hesther was a 'lady.'

'I'm sorry I had to send you such a rude message,' said Hesther, flushed, as she admitted Caroline to the narrow hall. 'It isn't that I was too proud,' she laughed, 'to go half-way to meet you, but I've three babies asleep in Father's room and I don't dare to leave them. I wonder if you'd mind coming upstairs to my bedroom. It's a short flight. We wouldn't . . . there'd be no chance, you see, of interruption.'

'Oh, dear,' said Caroline, 'the cute things! Will they cry?'

'I don't believe so.' Hesther's eyes laughed at the obvious perfunctoriness of the 'cute things' on Caroline's dry little tongue. 'If they do, I can put bottles into their mouths. The bottles are all ready.'

'Why do you do these things, Hesther Anne? I should think you'd have enough of babies at the Nursery during the week. What an imposition! The babies' mothers . . . ?'

'It's Sunday, you see, and they've gone off with their husbands to Cedar Grove. They can't take week-days and I just couldn't bear the thought of the babies on merry-go-rounds and Ferris wheels and Mystic Moorish Mazes. The air is so bad and the motion . . . for their poor loosely hung-together anatomies. Their parents will take them . . . rather than stay at home . . . even to moving-pictures late at night . . .'

'Do you ever go to Cedar Grove yourself?'

Caroline panted at the top of the stairs. The flight was short, but it was steep and her corsets were tighter every year. She had increased not so much in outline as in content and from this sacrifice of comfort to vanity she suffered. Following the literal advice of Angela's corsetière she had 'pulled up her stomach and made a nice little bust out of it.'

'No,' said Hesther, opening her door, 'I haven't quite come to that yet, Mrs. Gregory.'

'It's perfectly respectable,' said the wife of the owner of the Cedar Grove Pleasure Park.

'Oh, yes . . . This is my room.'

On the sill of its window lay a small composition book which Hesther, going past Caroline, whose eyes were pouncing and commenting and prying with wrinkled lids, quickly closed. It did not contain conscientious régimes for conduct, nor ejaculatory outbursts of love and gratitude, nor prayers asking forgiveness for poor Tom Devinney, but in it she had copied bits of poetry, philosophy, and what seemed, to her queerly experienced mind, worldly wisdom. She had in its pages been comparing the mysticism of the New Testament with its pragmatism. On that open page, divided into two columns, were written:

'Be ye followers of God as dear children. And walk in love as Christ also hath loved us . . . Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and evil-speaking be put away from you with all malice . . . and be ye kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you . . .'

While opposite this . . .

'To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written which no man knoweth saving him that receiveth it . . .'

Under this last quotation, Hesther had written . . . 'Nicholas.'

Caroline was neither mystically nor pragmatically religious. The worship of God came with her in importance somewhere between the twice-yearly visit to the dentist and the daily reading of the news . . . something, in other words, which all intelligent, normally efficient people, for their credit and welfare, did. She believed in and recited with terrifying glibness, her eyes closed . . . 'th' Holy Ghost, loran Giv-er Ligh . . . who proceedth Fath' and Son who

with Fathan Son gether . . . worsh'p . . . and glorified . . . who spake byth Proph'ts . . . ' she believed in 'thcathlic Post'lic Church and acknowledge one Bap-ism for 'mission sins,' and she looked for the "'srection thdead and Life world to come . . . Amen.'

She was proud of being able to repeat by heart all that incomprehensible mournful jargon, which fortunately nobody called upon her to explain, and proud that she had taught her children to repeat it. Martin could say it too . . . rather finely in his big round angry church voice . . .

But, at the moment, Caroline, not having been able to read Hesther's notes, was far from thinking of the Apostles' Creed. She was thinking of Hesther and of Hesther's room. Certainly there was no room which so completely expressed the banishment of clamor and evil-speaking. It was curiously still, curiously remote. Its window looked out into an immediate elm tree in which swung like a nest a tiny view of river and blue hill and sky. Gissing's lay in front of the house; here the elm tree stood, and behind it a stubbled field sloped up, and, where the creek flowed, a rocky opening with this captured bit of distance and of blue.

'You have a nice little room,' said Caroline. 'How neatly it is kept.'

She could not rid herself of the feeling that she was visiting the poor.

Hesther put Caroline into her one large chair . . . she had covered it with blue-and-white cretonne . . . and, having stealthily visited the silent babies and closed an intervening door or two, she returned to place herself opposite Mrs. Gregory beside the window. She wanted to keep the distance in her eye. She did not like Caroline and expected discomfort from the startling visitation.

'I suppose you're surprised to see me, Hesther Anne.'

'Yes.'

'I . . . we were all . . . well, startled by your father's marriage.' Caroline, by a familiar psychological perverseness,

was driven to mention this because she was particularly desirous to avoid the subject.

Hesther flushed and glanced quickly at the elm tree.

'It was extraordinarily sudden, wasn't it?' Caroline went on, as the moth again attacks the lamp-shade.

'I suppose it seemed so to you. I wasn't at all surprised.'

'But . . . poor Hesther! We were so *sorry* for you. I . . . I wonder if your father . . . he's so unworldly . . . quite knew what . . .'

'Please, Mrs. Gregory! You didn't come here to talk about Father's marriage, did you? I'm perfectly happy about it. I am very fond of Bessie. We knew all about her and . . . well, about everything.' Caroline's red deepened bitterly . . . 'And we couldn't help but admire and respect Bessie for her courage and her steadiness and the way she has brought up poor Tom.'

Caroline's red had faded. She was breathing rapidly. She regretted her speeches as to Julius's marriage, but with all that burden of event and change hanging between her and Hesther Anne, she had found no other natural opening, although the subject was certainly more painful in its associations to her than it could be to Hunt's daughter. Having so much conversation with Active Ants and other social inferiors had not taught Caroline to bridle and to guide her tongue nor to exercise what might once have been its powers of tactfulness. Sitting in Hesther's little bedroom in the working-man's house, smaller and plainer even than had been her own old house in Maple Lane, had thrown her into what Nicholas called her 'Big Frog' attitude and caused her to blunder badly. The fact that blunderers hurt themselves does not at Caroline's age seem to teach them anything. She made an enormous unaccustomed effort.

'It's none of my business, of course,' she said.

Hesther Anne did not contradict her.

'I ought not to have mentioned it. I hope you will ex—'

'Oh, certainly, though there's no reason on earth why you shouldn't speak of Father's marriage. I really expected it.'

Caroline swallowed audibly and made a fresh start.

'Is it really true that, since the Bishop has consecrated our . . . our . . . your father's chapel, that the services have become quite . . . quite . . .'

'Conventional again? Yes, that's true.' Hesther's eyes betrayed a certain painful bewilderment which evidently her father's second marriage with Tom Devinney's mother had not caused her. She had watched Julius in the spiritual anguish of his bereavement, had seen him under some mysterious inner torment, racked and distorted to a belief which in some way embodied, sublimated, and relieved his own wrestling with a passionate masked devil: but even for any one who, like Hesther, had watched this, it was surprising to see him, under an assuagement, under the gentle ministrations of Bessie with her big gray eyes and her narrow Madonna face, her devotion, and in that natural final union, change back, grow tamed, remote and clerical, satisfied with the old ways, a believer in his former gentlemanly God: God the Father and the patient merciful Judge, God the Aristocrat. What Hesther did not know was that Julius, having in the dark forest of widowed loneliness met with the Witch of Thwarted Desire, had been rescued by her benevolent fairy sister . . . Satisfaction. To every Abracadabra there is a reverse enchantment. His religion was merely self-expressive, his God merely the symbol of his own spiritual condition. Where he went, the greater part of his flock had followed him. The services in the Mission Chapel had become gradually more ritualistic than the services of Saint Matthew's. Julius wore his robes, and candles burned before his little altar, and there was, even, by the donation of a prosperous foreman, a stained-glass window in his chancel. There is a kindred appeal in the extremes of worship: the ranter is at heart a ritualist, incense or groaning, candles, genuflexion or the shouting of salvation: brother-exercises, all of them, under the skin.

Hesther had gladly renounced her useless struggle to accept the God of blood-atonement and of brimstone, but she

remained thereafter faintly pantheistic or rather bi-theistic, seeing her God, as it were, doubled, Janus rather than Om. Being a woman and thorough, her faith was not readily Protean.

'You must be very glad,' said Caroline, 'to have the old service. The service in which one is brought up means so much to one, I think.'

'But the Simpsons were all Baptists, weren't they?' asked Hesther Anne. Like that eager Oriental whom she unchangingly worshiped, she was peculiarly impatient of hypocrisy.

Caroline blushed. She was now as red as it was possible for her to become and her feather . . . a long black quill . . . trembled wretchedly.

Hesther was suddenly sorry for her. The preposterous little woman was Nicholas's mother, there was even that extraordinary brilliance of her eyes which she must have transmitted to Nicholas.

'Do let's stop gossiping about the "queer Hunts,"' said Hesther, leaning forward and putting her finger-tips for a second on Caroline's gloved hand, 'and tell me what you really came to see me for. I wish I could give you tea . . . but always on Sundays I let the kitchen fire go out. Tea is such a help. I'm afraid you and I are poles apart, but I'll try to get closer. You came, I know, to see me about . . .'

'About Nicholas,' gasped Caroline, and this was so absolutely and unutterably different from what Hesther Anne had expected that she turned white and drew back, pushing away her hazel-nut hair from her small ears.

'Oh, no,' she said emphatically, 'not about Nicholas!'

CHAPTER III

ABOUT NICHOLAS

IN those two words 'about Nicholas' there lay for Hesther Anne such a wealth of memory, such a pain of renunciation and such weariness of loving, that for several minutes she did not hear Caroline speaking nor even clearly see the small wretched angry figure, struggling for patience, leaning forward and pouncing at the arm of its chair with the gloved finger-tips gathered together for each impatient blow.

Instead . . . she saw Nicholas . . . heard him . . . again . . . all the times she had heard and seen him from that morning visit after Barbara's death when, returning from California, the funeral over, he had stood suddenly in her kitchen door like some gaunt and hard and bitter ghost.

'Don't sympathize with me, Hesther,' he had said. 'Every one's doing that. I've no more feeling than a stone . . . I never loved her.'

After a pause she answered evenly, looking at him with a conviction of her own that her eyes were a tender sort of sword, 'Once . . . I told you that myself. Why did you insult her then . . . Nicholas, by making her your wife?'

He had come close to where she sat and had gnawed his lip, as he looked down at her with his cold starry shadowed eyes.

'Because I wouldn't insult . . . you. She was your scape-goat, Hesther. Saints like you demand such sacrifices.'

Her anger as she pushed herself up before him had made her tremble.

'You insult . . . me . . . me . . . too . . . all women, yourself . . . and life. You've suffered so, Nicholas. I'm sorry. But it was ugly, so ugly . . . all of it . . . selfish and cold . . . to give yourself such memories!'

'A Black Mass,' Nicholas had muttered through his teeth.

As he prowled her kitchen, her angry tender eyes had dogged him faithfully.

'Let me come to see you sometimes, Hesther,' he had said at last, near the door again, hang-dog, and almost — poor Nicholas! — furtive. 'I've lost . . . my soul. I've gone blind. Will you help me?'

And indeed his eyes had been dazed with an agony of blindness.

'It's like the man you are . . . to ask *me* for help,' she had bitterly assented . . . 'Yes.'

A hard and acid understanding surely, but the basis of a six years' intercourse so sweet, so precious, and so baffling that Hesther's chief sensation in reaction to that 'about Nicholas' was sheer terror that the touch of Caroline's pouncing fingers might crush its delicacy.

' . . . Ever since Barbara's death,' Caroline was saying, the gossip in her coming to her aid and lending her a sort of belated gusto for what had been at first so difficult a self-expression, 'it's been growing on him.'

Hesther Anne pressed away her hair and full awareness came back into her speckled amber eyes. 'I'm so sorry,' she said softly, a voice sensitive and shrinking, but brave enough to encourage Caroline. 'I'm afraid . . . I don't . . . I didn't understand. I was so surprised, you see, at your coming down here to see *me* . . . about Nicholas.'

'I can't see why you should be surprised,' said Caroline bluntly, 'as you're the only person nowadays that sees Nicholas at all . . . or knows in the least what he's up to.'

Hesther was startled. Was it true? Was she Nicholas's only friend? . . . that Nicholas who had been so easily the friend of every one? She simply said her thoughts aloud.

'Is that really true, do you think, Mrs. Gregory?'

'I shouldn't be here if it wasn't true. It's not easy for me to come here to this house and talk to you about my son.'

Hesther shook her head sympathetically. 'No . . . naturally . . . it wouldn't be.'

'I care so much for Nicholas,' his mother went on, 'I've

thought more about him, worried more . . . and I've been so ambitious for him always. Angela was such a satisfactory child. She has always done the right thing . . . except that she and Ripley have no family . . . But now, you . . . Well, I had great hopes of Nicholas when he married. It was a horrible tragedy. But we couldn't have foreseen it or prevented it. I was sure that he would be like other people, successful like his father, and be a credit to us. Not' . . . Caroline lowered her voice as she reached the familiar demon-word, 'not . . . QUEER.'

'And now you think?' Hesther prompted. She was not in the least amused by that word of Caroline's which might to any one else have seemed a comedy of anti-climax: Hesther's own heart had a way of shivering sometimes over Nicholas's 'queerness.'

'Oh, Hesther Anne, my dear, we thought at first the change in him was natural enough. That dreadful accident for which he took the blame . . . poor boy! And stood all that horrible treatment . . . like a martyr. And then poor Barbara's death. I suppose she walked in front of the truck purposely, though we'll never know. But, on top of her public confession . . . it seems probable that she couldn't face the double blame. She knew what Nicholas had gone through and her punishment would have been his twice over, wouldn't it? And the dreadful accusation of drunkenness . . . so much worse for a woman . . . and then her letting Nicholas take the blame and going away . . .'

Hesther drew in a breath of painful memory.

'Yes . . . yes . . . pitiful, wasn't it? And of course we realized that for a long time Nicholas naturally couldn't be himself. He would be broken, changed. We were really patient with him . . . Angela and his father and I. Mr. Gregory wanted him to go away for a year. I've always thought that, if it hadn't been for you, Hesther, he'd have gone.'

'You would rather that he had gone, Mrs. Gregory?'

'Well, yes, I guess so. Because I think abroad . . . a year in Paris, perhaps, would have distracted him, have taken

some of the queerness out of him. And he'd have come back more like other people. But sticking here in Kaaterskill . . . my dear! He reads and studies all night long, he spends his week-ends in that dreadful little hovel up here somewhere on the mountain. He won't accept invitations. Angela has washed her hands of him. They quarreled.'

'Oh, no, I'm sure . . . Nicholas never quarrels.'

'But Angey does. She is furious with him . . . quite justly. He spoke rudely of her friends. If I remember, he called them katydids and said they talked with their thighs . . . quite vulgar, not like Nicholas, though that Bittering roughness will come out in all of them . . . 'They' and 'them' in Carrie's vocabulary always stood for the Gregorys. 'At any rate he was very rude and Ripley swore he wouldn't have him in the house again. And Angela, when she comes to Rosewreath, won't speak to Nicholas.' Poor Caroline's eyes of a doll were wet with quite un-doll-like tears. 'It's very painful for Martin . . . Mr. Gregory . . . and me, as we naturally love both our children. And we do sympathize with Angela in this. She has been a wonderful sister, so ambitious. It was she that brought about his marriage.'

'Yes?'

'Oh, yes. She sent Barbara out to Rosewreath . . . and Barbara did the rest. She was very clever . . . the way she managed Nicholas. I was greatly diverted at the time . . . the best thing in the world for him, though he was horribly angry and unhappy . . . for his father spoiled him always and I could never do a thing with Nicholas. Then, after the marriage . . . and wasn't it a lovely wedding? . . . everything was going beautifully. He was becoming Martin's right-hand man and going about with the right people . . . Oh, dear . . . I can't see why such horrible things happen to perfectly innocent people.'

'But Nicholas is still his father's right-hand man, isn't he, Mrs. Gregory?'

Caroline sighed in her spasmodic Simpson fashion. 'Oh, I don't know. Martin never complains, but he did say once

something about an "automatum." I looked up the word and it's . . . well, I've forgotten just what the dictionary said, but it's not exactly what you want for a partner . . . the opposite to a live wire. As a matter of fact there are . . . other young men . . . Martin has grown to depend on more . . . I hear from other sources . . .'

She looked dubiously at Hesther Anne, who blushed.

'It's all very wrong and uncomfortable,' mourned Caroline, 'very. I am not at all happy about Nicholas.'

'And you came to . . . to ask me . . .?'

Hesther Anne went nervously to the window and stood, half-turned from Caroline's intense, narrow-lidded scrutiny.

'To marry him and be done with it,' pounced Caroline.

Hesther looked at the nested fragment of distance in her elm tree . . . looked a long time before she spoke. Her small fine resolute profile told Caroline nothing.

'I was afraid you'd say that, Mrs. Gregory. Nicholas, you see' . . . she turned, leaned lightly back on the sill and smiled . . . 'Nicholas doesn't want to marry me.'

Caroline reddened.

'Then he is behaving very badly, indeed, and taking up a great deal too much of your time and keeping away other young men.'

'The young men of Gissing's?' laughed Hesther Anne, unregarded.

'And getting you talked about.'

'Oh, no, I don't think so.'

'Yes. He is. I've heard something of it. He must ask you to marry him. Nicholas is so . . . procrastinating.'

'But I don't want to marry him, Mrs. Gregory.'

'I don't believe you.'

Hesther spread out her hands. 'So much for that!' she said with gossamer mockery.

'What I mean is . . . of course you do . . . after six years . . . Nicholas . . .'

'Not after six years . . . Nicholas.'

'Then, my dear, you are even queerer for a woman than

he is for a man. Nicholas has everything any woman could ask for.'

Hesther again had turned away, this time completely.

'Not quite everything. He hasn't the power of loving, Mrs. Gregory.'

'What do you mean?' said Caroline, her queer little voice gone cold, betraying a scared agreement. 'I'm his mother . . . doesn't he love me?'

'Not the way you love him . . . not the way I love him.'

'Ah! So you do love him. I thought as much. Nicholas is very wicked . . . selfish. Why can't he love us . . . who have done so much for him?' She was quivering, more deeply moved, more hurt than life had yet been able to move or hurt her.

'Ah!' said Hesther, a grieving echo of Caroline's ejaculation of discovery, 'that's what I ask myself. I don't know why . . . except that . . .' She seemed to forget her visitor and her eyes groped . . . 'You remember . . .' Hesther again faced Nicholas's mother and, dropping her eyes, spoke in a low voice quiveringly, '"Woman, what have I to do with thee? . . . Mine hour is not yet come . . ."'

After that, very shortly after, with meaningless and stammering excuses, Caroline took her leave. She left that incomprehensible, that 'weird' saying . . . which must, no doubt, have come from somewhere in the Bible . . . unanswered. It had been natural, she supposed, for a clergyman's daughter to quote a Bible sentence, but, certainly, Hesther Anne was very queer indeed, not normal, and, far from being a possible cure for Nicholas's deficiency, was without doubt the true inspiration and cause of it. So much and nothing more had been gained from the miserable difficult visit to the house of 'that Devinney woman,' now respectably married to a clergyman and Bishop-blessed. Caroline knew now that, not marriage with the Hunt girl, but separation from her was the hope for Nicholas. She scorned herself for not having known as much in the first place and so have saved herself a humiliation. She suspected Hesther,

in the end, of a queerness rather more sinister than Nicholas's. The girl had lived for seven years in the slums, and for quite six in the companionship of Gissing's Magdalene. The God of Saint Matthew's Protestant Episcopal Church and of the Gregorys alone might know in what relationship she stood to a Nicholas who did not want to marry her, did not love her well enough to marry her . . . and whom she, nevertheless, boldly loved. Perhaps the young man retained more worldly wisdom of a certain sort than she guessed. Caroline was faintly encouraged by her own interpretation, which, nevertheless, profoundly shocked her.

That night, however, being unable to sleep, she got up and went into the upstairs sitting-room, and, having found a prominent, well-dusted, unread Bible, she sat down under a rose-shaded electric light and sought patiently until she found the page of Saint John's Gospel where Hesther's saying stood. And it was the story of a wedding-feast. 'And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, "They have no wine." Jesus saith unto her, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come."' "

Caroline read no further. Tight-lipped, angry, and shocked, she clapped smartly to the covers of her Bible. It was very irreverent, very unladylike of Hesther Anne to make such a comparison. And senseless. One couldn't understand such sayings, things they read out in church, but, at least, one had the good taste not to quote them, to put them in the mouths of ordinary young men who were making . . . or not making . . . love to one. She was disappointed in Hesther Anne . . . and in everything. The world . . . and life . . .

She sat there, a dreary disheveled little figure, gray-haired and heavy-eyed, staring in front of her, tears wet on her cheeks and bitter on her tongue . . .

'Ah, Nicholas . . . Nicholas . . . Nicholas . . . *you* wouldn't speak so to *your* mother, would you?'

CHAPTER IV

AND I WILL GIVE HIM THE MORNING STAR

BUT Nicholas had a friend of whom his mother, Caroline, knew nothing . . . not even the name. It stood above a sleeping Kaaterskill at dawn and Nicholas, pale and still, stood on the porch of his little hillside farmhouse and communed with it in a silence so entire that it made almost perceptible the turning of the world. The inaudible land lay dark and wet as a gull's wing, no color in field or river, the houses of Kaaterskill lidded in mist, the sky had no more light than the dull brightness of sand washed by the first shallow invasion of a tide, but, balanced in the dewy gray vacuum, the large morning star was brightly argent and diffused. It seemed to Nicholas almost the presence he had been waiting for, the spirit he had patiently invoked. It seemed to his rapt weariness all the answer a man long blinded might need. For it was mystery and beauty and eternity. It was flying like a white bird towards his open cage, his vacant temple . . . his emptiness.

As the world lifted, the star diminished, and Nicholas knew the inadequacy of poetry, knew that he wanted a Being, not a Song, that he was a Pilgrim, not a Pagan, no lover of Pan, but merely a prey to the great hungry Hound of Heaven. The Quest, in which he was half-pursuer, half-pursued, always his vague preoccupation, had, during the past few passionate and secret years, become the absorbing purpose, the increasing rapture of his mind and, in conflict with human claims, it had drawn lines in his young face and stolen from him the brilliance of his coloring, the almost swaggering grace of his carriage. As he stood on the hillside, wrapped in his narrow tweed coat, his rubber-soled shoes wet and stained with dew, stooping and patient and gray as an anchorite, he was hardly recognizable for the Nicholas

who had stood laughing above Lydia in the Fanes' June garden. His hair had withdrawn a trifle from his temples, he was lean rather than slender, his magic had subtly changed in quality, as a flame may change in color without diminution of intensity . . .

The mist rose from Kaaterskill, the river brightened, the ferry began to ply its insect route, red streaks that had been invisible clouds made a gate of bars against the brightening air. The factory whistle blew and Martin again possessed his Kaaterskill. The whistle seemed to blow the morning star out of the sky . . . Nicholas went into his house and there made himself coffee and ate a crust. He shaved, dressed carefully, and walked slowly down the mountain-side to work. As he went, the preoccupations of his Other Self came up to meet him, changing the expression of his face and eyes. There was to be a Directors' Meeting and undoubtedly there would be brought up the matter of Tom Devinney . . .

In fact, that April afternoon, Martin for the first time received Tom Devinney in his office. That he had never before so received him had become a flagrant breach in factory etiquette. It was a rule with Martin to keep in close personal touch with his employees, but with this foreman, the most prominent and powerful, he had managed to maintain a distance, delegating all unavoidable interviews with him to Nicholas. But the day had now arrived when Martin knew that he must overcome his dumb resistance. In accepting Nicholas's condition, in admitting Tom to the factory at all, he had practically accepted the whole gamut of performance and could not flinch at the final small surrender of a transparent incognito. Any further promotion of Tom Devinney, and such promotion, if he was to stay on at all with the works, had become a matter of the merest justice, would in any case bring the young man in unavoidable contact with the heads of the business. Martin admitted that Tom had been very patient under an unjust slowness

of advancement. At the meeting, to be present at which Nicholas had descended so early from his mountain, Martin's attention had been tactfully drawn to Devinney's conspicuous services and to the need in the executive department of such ability as he had shown. The position suggested was really in a way an encroachment upon the junior partner's perquisites, but the junior partner... Martin glanced at Nicholas listening with his strained bright-eyed attention... was not passionate about his perquisites...

'You'd better see Devinney yourself, Father,' Nicholas had said after the meeting, 'see him personally and get it over. No use playing the ostrich. You'll find him a pleasant chap to deal with. He'll make it easy for you.' Nicholas smiled quaintly as he said this, looking into his father's clouded eyes.

Martin's brow flushed. 'Very well. Have him sent up.' He stood a minute beside his son in the narrow bare passage, brooding... heavier even than he used to be, the comfortable loose clothes he wore increasing his aspect of a bulky big-skinned animal, redder, less hearty, but still a capable blunt shrewd good-natured man of business, more Bittering than ever, less and less like his lean, long, fair and 'different' Nicholas.

Tom Devinney, however, looked very Bittering indeed, strikingly so, when he admitted himself to Martin's presence a few hours later.

'Ah, that you, Devinney? Sit down. Be through in a moment... "...and will forward consignment at our earliest convenience..." got that, Miss Righter?'

Miss Righter had got that, and so much more than that, that her round snub motherly face was flushed. She couldn't keep her eyes from straying to Tom where he sat, straight and firm and stiff, his eyes leveled expressionlessly upon Martin. There was perhaps a little extra color in Tom's face, his thick tight mouth had a line of truculence. But he sat as still as wood, both feet planted on the floor, both

hands planted on the arms of his chair, and made no small betraying motions of uneasiness.

When she had finished the letter, Miss Righter found herself dismissed on a clearly fabricated errand and walked out with rebellion printed on her back . . . the rebellion of a wife. In fact she was wedded to the rubber factory and there were moments when she suffered the emotions of a slighted mate.

Alone with Tom, Martin turned slowly in his swivel chair and slowly looked up.

Tom smiled. It was the wide ready Bittering grin, more revealing of splendid teeth than of any emotion. Martin, however, was unconsciously warmed by it. 'This fellow,' he thought, with a queer pang of something like regretful pride, 'has turned out mighty well . . . the spit and image of my Uncle Roger. Good blood tells. And the mother was a decent little woman too, deserved, in spite of Caroline, the belated respectability that had so surprisingly befallen her. Careful women could never understand . . .'

'Look here, Devinney,' he said in his natural round voice, 'I owe you an apology. You ought to have been up here in this office long ago.'

Tom's eyes, brown and small, rather like the buffalo's, traveled around the room. 'Didn't expect it,' he said.

'Well, you ought've expected it. You had a right to expect it. I've done my best, I admit, to keep you out . . . and down . . . but it's no go. You've got the thing in you that sends a man to the top . . . like a cork. Can't be kept down. During these past five years, you've saved us, in one way or another, thousands of dollars. You've never taken your attention from our interests. This last contrivance of yours which you were generous enough to hand over to the firm, why, Devinney, there's a fortune in it . . . unpuncturable . . . practically . . . that's what it looks like. Any other manufacturer would have given the eyes out of his head to buy the secret of it.'

'Well, sir, that may be. But you see, I've got myself sort

of identified with your concern and just naturally couldn't see any other factory get off with it.'

'You could have driven a bargain with us, though.'

Tom, for the first time, showed embarrassment. He crossed his legs, folded his arms, a position which, being more natural, was much more becoming than the first. 'I've felt too much . . . in your debt,' he growled, 'to — to be driving bargains with you. It's not every man that would have given me a chance in his business, sir . . . not under the circumstances.'

He flushed deeply, and Martin looked away.

'Mighty decent of you — er — Tom, to feel that way about it . . . under the circumstances . . . Well, let's get to business. I don't let any man go without his just deserts and what you deserve from the Kaaterskill Rubber Plant is just what I've brought you up here to explain.'

It took a certain amount of explaining, of amplification, and by the time Tom fully understood the extent of his promotion and what the future might hold for him, his lips were uncertain and his eyes were wet.

'It means a — hell of a lot to me, sir . . . I beg your pardon.'

'Now, you get married,' shouted Martin, pointing an angry-looking finger at him, 'get married to some nice little woman . . . there is one, ain't there?'

Tom had risen to leave, was in fact halfway towards the door. There he paused and his face changed.

'Yes, sir. There is one,' he said, and he was his old surly dangerous self, 'but your . . . *son* . . . has got ahead of me there. She's Miss Hesther Anne Hunt . . .'

He drew aside with a stifled exclamation as Nicholas entered.

There was a second's awkwardness, the three men looking at one another and away, then Tom solved the situation by silently going out.

Martin waited until the door had closed, then he jumped up and began to walk heavily about the room. Nicholas

stood just where he had stopped inside the door and watched him.

‘Did you hear that, Nicholas?’

‘About Hesther Anne? Yes. Sorry, Father, I did knock and I heard you shout out something . . . You seem to have got Tom’s confidence . . . not that he’s reserved about his courtship.’

‘Well, look here . . . how long has it been going on?’

Nicholas answered soberly: ‘A great many years, I’m afraid. I think Tom loved her ever since Sunday-School days.’ He went over to the great window and looked down into a court far below where some youths in overalls were sweeping and piling up boards. Martin was proud of the neatness of that court.

‘Of course,’ Martin plumped back into his chair before the desk, ‘he hasn’t a chance with you around.’

Nicholas started and wheeled about to face him.

‘If I thought he had a chance . . . without me being around . . .’

‘You never can tell, Nicholas. Tom is a fine upstanding young chap and he speaks well, too. He’s not without education and . . . well, he’s got mechanical genius, executive ability . . . he’ll go far.’

A queer flash of laughter went over Nicholas’s face.

‘I believe you’re *for* Tom, Father.’

Martin made a fidgety motion. ‘You’ve had six years to make up *your* mind,’ he said angrily.

The look of laughter faded, stiffened, wearily died.

‘About what, Father?’

‘Why, about Hesther Anne.’ Martin pushed papers about on his desk. ‘Your mother tells me . . .’ He stopped, then, having made up his mind to speak, went through like a charging bull at a rush the great accumulated barrier of his reserve towards Nicholas and, in the very anguish of so doing, became almost violent. ‘Your mother tells me that Hesther Anne cares for you, that she admits it, and that you won’t ask her to marry you, and that the whole damn place is

talking about it . . . looks kind of bad for Hesther Anne and, to my way of thinking, a whole lot worse for you. In fact, while we're at it, I don't mind telling you that I'm damn sore about it . . . and about a lot of other things.' The sudden flare of his occasional bad temper was upon him and he began to shout and to pound the desk. 'Yes, it's all a piece with your general laissez-faire, don't-give-a-damn-for-any-one-but-yourself way of living. I've been patient with you long enough. You had a horrible time six years ago, but I'm damned if I can go on much longer like this . . .'

'Like what?' stammered Nicholas.

'You're no good to the business. You're a soulless machine. That's not what I need here. You'd do anywhere . . . feeding a furnace, filling a mould . . . I don't get any use out of your education or your creative ability . . . if you've got any. Where are your ideas? Oh, you get through your work after a fashion. Oh, yes, you look well, dress well, credit to the business . . . and the men . . . some of them . . . like you, because you smile at them . . . smiling's easy and one of the best things you do . . . and stop to talk to them about their wives and babies.' Other of his employees had felt the scoring weight of Martin's sarcasm, but this was the first time in his life he had turned the weapon upon his son. 'I ask you to do something, you do it, damn quick and damn well, shows me what you could do if you had a mind to. But where's your initiative? Where's your real usefulness as a junior partner? Since he's been in the business, Tom has done more than . . . you'd think that he . . .' Martin stopped.

Hesther Anne was right: Nicholas never quarreled. But now he was deeply flushed and had laid hold of the window-sill behind him tightly with both hands.

'I've done my best,' he said quickly and as simply as a boy.

'You have not!' shouted Martin. 'That's a lie.' Nicholas lifted his head a little, frowning. 'Well, it damn well is. You're not capable of facing the truth . . . never were. Look at Hesther Anne. No . . . I'll say just what I think to you.

I've held my tongue all my life . . . and my hand. I ought to have thrashed the stuffing out of you, as Carrie told me. It might have put some common sense, some idea of reality and other people's rights, into you. You were always so damn remote and — sweet — and mysterious, that you scared me. I ought to have beaten you . . . a lot. Little John has turned out better, conscientious, straight, reliable.'

Nicholas smiled faintly, not at all in scorn, but in obvious tenderness towards Little John; and Martin, seeing that expression on his face, stopped pounding his desk and fortunately — for in the outer office stenographers and clerks were breathless and pale with listening — lowered his voice.

'It's too late now,' he said mournfully, 'but I'd like to save poor little Hesther . . . from you, Nicholas, damned if I wouldn't. I always was fond of Hesther Anne.'

'Oh, God,' said Nicholas, and he threw up his chin and closed his eyes. 'Oh, God!'

Martin was very much startled and taken aback by this oath from Nicholas. 'What are you swearing about?' he asked pettishly. 'I don't allow swearing in my office . . . Well, look here, I didn't quite mean all that, Nicholas. I guess I was more stirred up than I knew about this Devinney business. But I don't like to see Hesther Anne hurt . . . I was always fond of Hesther Anne.'

'So was I,' said Nicholas, and he went past his father and out of the office and did not look back.

It was the first time he had left that office without leaving also in Martin's memory one of those smiles for which the father had so contemptuously scored him. Its absence laid a heavy shadow on Martin's spirit. How he loved that smile of Nicholas's . . . just to have it near him in the business was worth a partner's salary. He began to wince over the things he had shouted at Nicholas. It wasn't just to taunt him with John's straightness. Nicholas was straight enough . . . good Lord! his straightness had cost the business money more than once. And it had been pretty tough about Hesther Anne . . . what he'd said about saving her

from Nicholas. Likely enough Carrie had it all wrong . . . and who was he, in any case, to accuse a son of selfishness towards any woman? Nicholas had looked very queer over that accusation . . . white.

'I dare say, though,' he consoled himself, 'a thorough raking over the coals will do the boy good . . . wake him up. He's been crying for it since he was seven years old.'

Martin, however, felt dubious and sighed deeply as he rang the bell for Sadie Righter.

When a man climbs a savage mountain, thought Nicholas, the earth drops away, he says good-bye first to the houses and the people of the plains and then to trees and shrubs and animals. At the beginning of the last dangerous craggy bit, he leaves his fellow climber, the guide that went two thirds of the strange toiling way with him. Afterwards it is like a dropping-off of garments, he goes quite naked and alone. There is a shrewd and searching air aloft a mountain. It is cold. Nicholas knew that he now faced the last piece of his road. He made no hesitations, however, but, as he left the factory immediately after his interview with Martin, went down to Hesther Anne.

He saw her ahead of him as he went, walking along a little cindery path beside the creek. She was not far from the factory gate, had come on an errand to one of the Day Nursery mothers and was in haste to be back. But Nicholas pursued her and laid an urgent hand upon her arm. He had come straight from his father's furious and belated lashing and was still white.

'Hesther,' he said, 'drop everything and come up the mountain with me for the rest of the day. I'm in my senses at last. Everything is clear. I've got to tell you. I'll wait for you on the other side of the bridge. Bring your cape. It's cooler up there.'

Hesther looked up at him for a moment without speaking. Back of her clear eyes the quick intuitive brain worked rapidly, preparing her, perhaps, even before she agreed,

like little Isaac, to accompany her sacrificer up the mountain. Certainly she was immediately as pale as he.

'Nicholas,' she said, 'don't wait for me by the bridge. It may take me an hour to find some one to fill my place at the Nursery . . . unless Bessie is free. Go on up to your house. I'll join you there. I shan't mind going up alone.' She hesitated and the color rose uncertainly to her face. 'Have you seen your mother since yesterday?'

'I didn't go home at all last night.'

'Ah.' This was a breath of dubious relief, and Hesther contemplated him thereafter questioningly. 'I thought maybe she had been talking to you about me. She came to see me yesterday afternoon and stayed a long time. I'd better tell you about it . . . maybe.'

'I can imagine,' said Nicholas bitterly. 'In fact, she spoke to Father . . . What a fool I've been . . . always . . . Hesther.'

'God's Fool,' smiled Hesther.

She left him and, bitterly revolving her epithet, he went on up his well-worn trail. 'God's Fool' . . . a shrewd title enough for the idiot that has neither wit nor wisdom for the world, nor courage for its realities . . . what was it Stephen had said? . . . 'Exalts his own cowardice into a still-hunt for that easy glorification of man dignified by the name of God . . .'? Nicholas's face burned as he walked. Man's scorn and woman's lashed him in the voice of Martin . . . 'well-dressed, creditable, an easy smiler . . . the best thing you do,' and, 'I would like to save Hesther from you, Nicholas, if I could.'

Nicholas stopped and ground his heel into the earth. That cold and starry hard-won happiness of his forsook him.

'Why am I so accursed? What is the nightmare obsession? Is it too late now, even after these years of self-indulgence, to fling it off my back? O God, in Whom I cannot believe, Thou Spirit, that pursues me and Who has not found me and on Whom I wait, take Thy pursuit from me, set me

free, release me, let me live like other men. Why do You demand of me a renunciation so awful and so infamous? Why must I sacrifice to You Who are not, not only the world's good approval, but my own self-respect?'

This was an old torment. Nicholas closed quivering lids and was in a sweat like a man who runs indeed. Hesther's dear and golden eyes, the tenderness of her body, of her hand . . . He was not God's Fool, but Satan's surely: only the insane pride of Lucifer could equal his, could fling him out of Heaven headlong. She loved him, dearest heart, she loved him. He had seen it in her eyes, he had heard it in her voice . . . as though . . . as though he was her God. The anguish of this conviction was like a spearhead in his body.

He reached the farmhouse and stretched himself on the porch, closing his eyes and resting his head in folded arms. No morning star now, but a warm comradely sun and lisp-ing birds, love-makers in all the little viridescent birch trees running half naked up towards the blue sky. Were there blossoms in his orchard? Could he smell violets . . . violets?

CHAPTER V

THE WAY

NICHOLAS explained himself to Hesther Anne.

'I must make you understand. If nobody else in the world can understand me, you must, Hesther, for when I've explained it to you as far as words can ever explain anything . . . I'll leave it in your hands. You must decide for me. There's no one I can believe in as I believe in you. If I renounce the world and have not you, Hesther, I am a "sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal." I can bear the rest of it: Father . . . I'll break his heart, Mother, she'll hate me if she can, Angela . . . well, she has never loved me. Stephen's contempt, what the world will do . . . laugh, I dare say, and I hate that. Oh, I do hate that, Hesther. And Little John . . . just scared, anxious and sorrowful and scared. And Lydia with her clear Greek love of life just as it is, her fearlessness, she'll laugh at me too in her own way . . . sweetly. But you, Hesther, you mustn't laugh nor cry nor sneer nor hate . . . nor break your heart, or you'll break mine and I'll die under the first little stone you cast at me . . . I'll never find God unless you give me leave . . . let me go free with both your hands, Hesther.'

The sun was sloping against the hill. It had made of the gray farmhouse a small golden temple in the porch of which sat Hesther, still as a patient idol, her hands on either side of her face, her eyes hidden from him, her head bent, listening. Nicholas, who had sat beside her, had stood and moved about, had spoken and was silent, his eyes brilliantly pleading with her for comprehension, for an infinity of comprehension. Without meeting the beggary of his look, she had dwelt upon him, upon his brightness, his pallor, the spare clean tormented lines of him, upon the motions of his mobile, cleanly modelled lips, on his hands, long, tanned, attractive

in their nervous and expressive energy. His body spoke to her: mutely, with dumb languor she possessed the shapeliness of his lean head, the straight lines of neck and back, the rather slack bent shoulders, the long thighs, the turns and angles of his limbs. But she listened too . . . as, through the thunder of an advancing crowd, a woman may listen to the pleadings of a child beside her knee.

' . . . It isn't with me a matter for faith, you see, Hesther. I can understand that faith would make everything easy. You shut your eyes and fold your hands and let the questions die out into a beautiful silence and then, humbly, you say, "Our Father Who art in Heaven . . ."'

'Why don't you say that, Nicholas?'

'Because, you see, I think there's something better than that. Without faith, I believe. I believe the way I believe that you are here within reach of my hand.'

'Within reach of your hand,' Hesther repeated.

'That if God is at all, He really is . . . that faith is just as unnecessary for a belief in God as it is necessary for a belief in fairies. We don't have to exercise faith to believe in, say . . . the action of our own hearts. If there is no God, then you need faith to create one, for certainly, without God, man is no better than a maggot.'

'Except for his power of loving,' said Hesther.

'Loving? Ask Stephen to tell you about his power of loving. He'll explain it to you. He's great on origins . . . maternal instinct, herd instinct, self-preservation, property rights, aggrandizements of the ego . . . he's got every kind of love, even the love of God, tabulated, ticketed, arranged . . . convincingly.'

'Convincingly?' smiled Hesther. 'But I *know*. Stephen can't tell me anything about that . . . God is Love. It's very simple.'

'I want to find Him!' Nicholas locked his lips, his hands, while his eyes searched. 'For, listen, Hesther, if there is a God, nothing else can matter. There's no despair, no loss, no death. God catches you up in a shining cloud, carries you,

transfigures . . . And, mind you, if there is a God, He's an actuality, a *fact in Nature*. That's what faith has robbed the world of . . . God. We've shut our eyes tight and we've stopped seeking. We have said, "I believe, Lord, I believe." But, listen, Hesther . . .' (As if she were not listening . . . but perhaps he felt without understanding it that her sense of him physically was stronger than her will to hear and understand.) 'If He is a fact, and we have . . . have always had . . . that glimmering sense of Him, surely He may be known, as we know other facts. Surely there is a way of finding Him, of possessing Him, of making Him intimately and irrefutably our own, and, in so doing, don't you see? overcoming the world. There's a tool, somewhere, a key . . . it's only to find the way . . .'

"I am the Way and the Truth and the Life, no man cometh unto the Father but by Me."

'Hesther, yes. But what is that "me," that "Christ"? It's the Way, isn't it? Actually, literally, somewhere, within me, you, every one, as there was within that Christ, is a spark of life which has never died . . . and I'm not talking poetry or figures, but literal scientific, physical or chemical fact . . . which has been handed down through many lives and deaths, which must once have been actually a part of that Force which started the queer spinning of the worlds . . . which is immortal . . . which must be . . . God. And if it is in me, part of me, don't tell me that with patience, freed from the distractions of objective living, I can't find it, touch it, know it, use it as I use my hand or foot or eyes or will. It's there, it's in me . . . God . . . closer than breathing, nearer than hands or feet, so close, so near, so real and intimate a part of us that, straining beyond it with our eyes closed by faith, we've somehow missed it, lost it. Sometimes when I've withdrawn into an enormous space of silence, gone very far within, not trying, acquiescent, just withdrawn, just waiting, just detached, I've almost touched it, come within thrilling contact with it . . . That's the real union, Hesther, the real ecstasy of which human unions are

the symbol, the groping-towards . . . marriage . . . human love.

'He has been found, He's been known by the very few that were willing to lose their lives to find Him. And those few have been the saviours of mankind. Just by the mere emanation of their discovery, the borrowed, misunderstood, perverted light of it . . . they've lit the darkness of the world. Such men, accursed, perhaps, possessed, but surely the only happy men, have gone up into a mountain and freed themselves from the world and all the dearness and the nearness, the ache and the smallness, the fret and bitterness and disillusionment . . . the symbols. They came down again . . . they must come down . . . when they have touched the thrilling inmate, when that power and that kingdom and that glory lie in your hand, you must come down to speak. You have a tongue, a message. Life is like . . . a light.'

He stopped and stood there, white with exultation, his blind brilliant fatal look upon him.

'I've tried to escape Him. I've busied myself with tools, I've hidden, I've run, but He's coming . . . it's a dark or a shining necessity. It's fear, it's rapture. I surrender to it. I must wait. I must be still and KNOW THAT HE IS GOD.'

They were both still. The light of the dipped sun climbed over them, the golden temple turned to an ash-gray shanty on a hillside above the Hudson River. The evening factory whistle blew. Nicholas stood rigidly still, a sudden fine color in his face.

'So you must give up the world,' said Hesther. 'You must leave your work down there and your father and your mother and your life. You must come up here and be alone here, night after night, with all your stars. Sometimes it'll rain, Nicholas . . . it will be dark, there won't be any stars . . .'

'I must. I don't know why. I can't answer. I've tried to escape. It's what I must do . . . the only way for me . . . it's happiness.'

'Happiness,' said Hesther.

She stood up from the step where, since she had come to

him three hours before, she had held herself motionless, listening. She came closer to him and the soft April wind blew her dress and her hair which she pushed away and held back from her temples.

She said . . . for his face was rapt and lifted . . . 'Look at me a moment, Nicholas.'

It was as if he came down from a tower which commanded the sun sinking below into the bright under spaces of the air. He seemed to descend rather slowly into the warm shadows where she stood, part of that faint earthy fragrance of violets.

She said, looking up at him with a smile in her clear flecked eyes, 'But what about me, Nicholas?'

Nicholas's heart must have turned as though a pilot had flung round a wheel to change suddenly a dangerous course, for he whitened. The April wind thrust Hesther forward. She flung her body against his, drawing in, pressing, quivering as though not breath of April but a wall of flame held her there, anguished. Her hands worked themselves into his clothing, knitted themselves there. She did not look up. She bent her head against his breast.

'You've told me what you want,' she said. He could feel through his thin shirt the warmth and movement of her lips. 'Now, listen . . . there is only one thing I want from life. I want you. I want to possess you, to be possessed by you.' She breathed like a scared creature. 'I want to hold in my body that spark of your immortality, which came through so many women's lives and deaths, from God . . . which is God. I want your child. My mind and my soul and my heart want it . . . and my body. It's like your hunger for God, more searching . . . for haven't I always had God? . . . more hungry, Nicholas, more cruel. Before you lose your life, marry me, for the love of God, my God, your God . . . take me . . . so that you will have a life to lose, a life to give up, a true renunciation.'

He held her and she waited, tortured past any shame she might have felt, that might have been necessary to the poor

prisoner of Julius's creed, and of her own humble acceptance. That little book of prayer and precept, of régimes for conduct, the Thomas à Kempis meditations, was all torn and scattered about the chamber of her spirit, no longer quiet or empty or remote. She had made her demand of life with a courage greater than might have been expected. She knew what she wanted, this small quiet thoughtful woman, she had the honesty to know, at last . . . the courage to overcome her pride. It would have been easier to ask Nicholas for less, but she had known Tom's bitterness. Her child must have a name.

'I know that you would love me, Nicholas, if you could.'

'I do love you . . . too much . . . too much . . .'

'I don't ask to keep you, Nicholas. I won't hold you back. If I were asking that of you I *would* be ashamed. If I tried to keep you and gave you children, you would be always bound, and held away from this pursuit of yours. A man, it seems, can't seek God, not your mystic eternal man's God . . . the Word that was God, the Word before it became flesh . . . and, at the same time, hold a woman in his arms. I don't ask you to come down from your mountain and to be a faithful husband, a father, an anxious human man. But marry me, Nicholas, and give me my child. You may leave me then. I won't try to hold you. I wouldn't let you stay. We — we — the child and I, can manage very well. I have friends. I have father . . . and Bessie. I will be happy. Life won't be so patient . . . and aching, so unfulfilled . . . so cold. Is it too much to ask, Nicholas? before you leave me for your . . . Unknown God?'

As he held her in his arms, breathing in the warm softness of the earth and her together, Nicholas was tormented. He knew that if he denied himself . . . and her, it would be for his own preservation, not for Hesther's. At this moment, he escaped the almost inescapable temptation of man to justify, to compensate, to give his selfishness some finer name. Nicholas knew that to deny Hesther — no matter what the ache of his own self-denial — would be to give him-

self a release, a security from blame. He saw the event clearly and its consequences. He would marry her, and if he did so marry her and afterwards desert her, as she would have him do, as he knew, knowing the two men that were in him, he would have to do, or become again that icy automaton which had, occultly, driven Barbara to death . . . desert her . . . Oh, of course she should have all he could give her but himself . . . and that was true desertion . . . why then, in the end, he would lose her love, and in the end he would have, perhaps her hatred, certainly the hatred of her child. The world, its laughter silenced, would stone him. Hesther didn't foresee that. It would stone him. He had felt already in his life the bruising impact of its missiles.

He stood there, holding desire in his arms, and fought his old battle over again. If he married her and took her and learned to know fully her loveliness . . . could he then, obedient to that fatal calling in his brain, could he forsake her? To be a husband and father, he knew with an icy certainty, was a gift denied to him. The small great cares and tendernesses, the sweet corrosive duties and compunctions were a barrier of interlocked thorns between him and his quest. As some men know themselves incapable of marital fidelity, so Nicholas knew himself incapable of permanent human intimacies. He could not again, even with the help of a real affection, a profound tenderness, go through that horrid divorcement of self from essential Self. Nevertheless he admitted Hesther's claim, and understood her need, and he knew, as he stood there and foresaw the consequences, that he must go down to this strange ecstatic martyrdom . . . not a Black Mass, this time, but a Mass as white as sacrificial flame . . .

'Hesther, don't shake so. My darling, I love you. We'll be married. Yes . . . and yes . . . and yes. I'll do anything you ask. I told you it lay in your hands. You understand me. You know how I'm cursed. Only, be sure it's for your real happiness. Be sure. Don't think of me at all.'

'No,' sobbed Hesther, kissing his breast, his hands, his lips. 'It's not happiness for you. It's sorrow, it's bitter, bitter sorrow. But for me, dear Nicholas, dearest Nicholas, it's happiness. *You* won't have the child.' Her voice sang, her face, lifted, was a rose against his heart. 'It's God, my God . . . my Way . . .'

CHAPTER VI

NOT NOWADAYS . . . NOT A GREGORY . . . NOT MY SON

THE Head of the Rubber Factory, of the Cedar Grove Pleasure Park, and the Signal Mountain Hotel Company, had not, as he grew older, found the world a disappointing place. Far from it. He was satisfied with his achievements and sufficiently comfortable about his prospects and the prospects of his children. His exasperation with Nicholas had been the result less of a long, secret, but not very profound dissatisfaction with his son's business methods, than of an interview with Caroline, who had irritated him as of old with her criticisms of his indulgence towards Nicholas and had alarmed him concerning what the world said about his son and Hesther Anne. He had blown off all this accumulated steam in that interview and had really not given the matter much of his attention since.

Nicholas had gone on with his work in much the same cool automatic fashion and the subject of his duty to Hesther Anne had not been mentioned between his father and himself. Martin accepted reality and lived in the mood and occupation of the moment. Nicholas's queerness he had long ago acknowledged to Carrie and himself and did not let it trouble him too greatly. Nicholas wasn't quite the ideal junior partner, but he might easily have been worse. Martin sometimes remembered with a grim amusement his dread of the young graduate's arrival: instead of the fire-brand innovator he had feared, Nicholas after the first rather feverish activity had been docile, clear-headed, careful, and not at all disturbing, rather a conventional man of business when you came to think about it. Probably, if the senior partner had told himself the truth, any great assertiveness on the part of the junior would now have unbearably disconcerted him. He liked Nicholas as he was, was used to him. That flare-up

had been inspired also by a reaction against his secret admiration of Tom Devinney. He understood Tom as he would have liked to understand Nicholas. Tom was Bittering and a thoroughgoing business man, no trouble speaking your mind to him. A subconscious wish that Tom had been Nicholas had made Martin angry with himself and for this guilty self, Nicholas had suffered. Damn it . . . why can't you be Tom and woo Hesther like a man and understand the needs of my business and devote yourself to my interests and get yourself praised by the Directors and really be indispensable . . . invent unpuncturable tires? Martin had got rid of his ill-humor, his disappointment, and was quite the Martin of Kaaterskill, Rosewreath and Maple Lane, when Nicholas came to him a few days later.

'Father, I want to speak to you. Are you busy? May I? Alone?'

It was the first time he had come into the office since that unpleasant interview and Martin looked up quickly from his desk with an ingratiating smile. Miss Righter had not waited to be dismissed. Rather like a snowflake she had melted from the office, a chill small presence . . . then gone.

Nicholas came over and stood before his father. The smile remained fixed on Martin's mouth. This boy who stood before him was the old Nicholas, remote and brilliant and star-eyed. There was a fine high color in his face.

'What's happened to you?' his father stammered.

'I've made up my mind. I've given in . . . that's all.' Nicholas began to pace the room, striking one hand into the other and biting at his lip. 'If only I could make you understand!'

'You might try,' suggested Martin dryly, watching him.

'I ought to have told you about it long ago,' Nicholas turned the brilliant strange gaze upon him. 'You will think I'm mad.'

'Perhaps. Let's have it anyway.' The swivel chair revolved and squeaked as Martin threw himself powerfully back in it and scowled, facing the light back of his son.

'I came into the factory to please you, Father, because you expected me to come, because you told me you had built up the business for me, because I was too great a coward to bear your disappointment, and because I thought I could get rid of my real . . . my real preoccupation.'

'Your . . . what?' asked Martin mildly.

Nicholas flushed, went on swiftly: 'I've tried for six years to be the man I ought to be, was born to be, educated to be, the man — let's say — that Tom Devinney naturally is or that Angela, with a change of sex, would be. You and Mother, you know, have always been disappointed in me . . . always.'

Martin grew red. 'No . . . no, Nicholas. You're holding up against me what I said the other day in a fit of temper. You mustn't say that. You've been a good son, on the whole. You've had a rough time.'

'Oh, that was my own fault, part of my cowardice. But let's leave that marriage alone. It doesn't bear speaking of . . . thinking of . . .' His face shadowed coldly, darkly.

'No. No,' said Martin hastily, 'we won't go over that. I hope you're going to tell me . . .'

Nicholas's face softened. 'I'm not going to tell you anything you'd like to hear, Father. I'm going to prove myself just what Mother and Angela have always thought me' . . . his face blazed . . . '*queer*.'

'Out with it then. So long as you don't quit me cold.'

Nicholas's shadow of regret, almost of shame, visibly deepened and he spoke with great unwillingness.

'That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to leave the factory . . . retire.'

'Retire?' Martin's chair creaked. 'What for? What do you mean? What are you going to do?'

Nicholas came close, drew in a long breath, and looked down into Martin's eyes; through his own there shone the untouchable shining splendors of his boyhood, his magic, his appeal.

'I'm going to find God,' he said.

After a silence, 'Good Lord!' whispered Martin, and Nicholas involuntarily laughed. Martin added, after three or four seconds during which the color crept out of his face, 'What'll you live on?' and then he grew very red. 'I won't give you a copper cent . . . for that,' he announced.

'I won't need it, Father. I've my little place up there on the hill. I want only a few books, a boy will bring me up my supplies from Creek Kaaterskill. I haven't spent much of my salary.'

'You've been saving up . . . investing . . . for this?'

'No . . . I didn't know. I tried to do both . . . serve God and Mammon.'

'Serve God? I thought you'd set yourself to find Him. My Lord, what a crazy fool you are! Religious mania, that's what it is. You ought to be locked up.'

Martin's broad face, set and white again, was dangerous and cruel. Such a look Nicholas had never before seen upon it. The hard tormented eyes were the eyes of an animal and of a judge.

'Haven't you God enough in your church? Hasn't your mother taught you how to worship Him? . . . what to believe? It was always that — damn you! . . . God. I sent you away to school for that. Well, it's an easy way to shirk making a living, doing a man's job in the world. Priests, fakirs, monks . . . Pah! Mystics . . . Pah! In India they beg. In this country, we do better . . . we shut them up: loafers, vagrants, lunatics. So you'll go and live up there in your shanty . . . eh? I won't give you a red cent. When you've run through your savings . . . or prayed through them . . . you either work or you starve. You've failed already at begging, haven't you? I suppose you thought I'd keep you. I'm not going back on my creed as to the insanity of stupid mercy. You've got to learn your lesson just precisely the way nature teaches it. The fit can't carry the burden of the unfit and survive . . .'

'There are different kinds of fitness, aren't there?'

'There's only one kind a real man knows anything about

... the ability to stand on his own feet, pay his debts and take care of his wife and children. What's the matter with you? What do you mean? Finding God? Don't we all believe in Him, eh?'

'I don't know. I've never found Him. It takes ... well ... time.'

'Very well. Take all the time you want.' Martin broke off. His hands were trembling. 'Have you told your mother?'

'I will.'

'Yes. Well, she's always been afraid of it ... used to lie awake, worrying about you. Women see such things. You never did like ... reality, did you, Nicholas? Always hunting for a way out? Always despised me and my factory and my recreation scheme and the hotel and all the rest of it ... what I've done ... spent my life doing? Wanted something different, more noble, eh? mysterious ... *easy*. It'll be easy to live up there on the mountain thinking about God, easy for a while anyway ... until the money goes ...'

'Then I'll come to you,' said Nicholas softly, 'and you'll give me some. What is money worth if it can't release a man for ... search?'

Martin pressed the bell and when his white-haired 'office boy' appeared, he said sharply, 'Show this man out, Roger. We haven't anything for him to-day.'

Roger stared, winked, and rubbed his mouth, uncertain whether he was meant to laugh or no, but scared by the pale catastrophe of Martin's face.

Nicholas, as pale too as though fire had touched him, laughed gayly, beautifully, without bitterness or malice.

'Good-bye,' he said. 'If I find Him I'll share Him with you. He has always been a Beggar, a Knocker at closed doors ... and not at all ashamed.' And he went out as quickly as he had entered, lightly and firmly closing the office door.

Martin kept on with his work until the end of the day. In

fact he worked later than usual, postponing the going home to Caroline. He felt hard and cold and capable, and went over his entire scheme of control in order to see what was to be done with the departments that had been assigned to Nicholas. A junior partner, a partner of some sort was a sheer necessity. A younger man. The concern must remain . . . Gregory. If only Angela had been his son!

Under the outer composure and activity, he felt disgraced and shamed. He could never explain, to a sane and laughing world, this craze of Nicholas's. Anything would have been better: a clergyman, a missionary to China, a slummer . . . anything. To go up and live in the bushes and hunt for God! Shame burnt him . . . the discomfort of the thing, its idiocy! Nicholas a laughing-stock, himself pilloried as the father of a Freak! Caroline . . . it would kill her. What could he do? Would it really not be possible to shut Nicholas up somewhere quietly? He was certainly abnormal. At his age . . . with everything in the world a man could want . . . Oh, there had always been such fellows in the world, of course, one read about them . . . who gave up everything and went into monasteries or retreats . . . or wandered about preaching hysteria to riff-raff of the lanes . . . but not nowadays, not in America . . . not in his family . . . A Gregory . . . Nicholas . . . his own son!

A keen realization of the truth cut him as he crossed the courtyard to his waiting motor and he stopped, catching back an outcry in his throat. He felt his arm touched.

'Are you ill?'

There was Tom Devinney at his elbow, steadying him.

'Thanks, Tom . . . Yes . . . giddy. I think . . . indigestion. That my car?'

'Yes. Let me walk over with you. You're pale. Shall I get you a drink? Whiskey? Water?'

'No. I'll be all right.' His voice broke weakly. 'Thanks . . . Tom . . . Tom . . .' a cry of bitter tenderness. The son . . . the son . . . the son . . . whom he was to lean on when the days for leaning came.

In the motor he made a further decision, postponing . . . Caroline.

'Jimmy,' he said, 'take me round to the Homestead. I want to stop in and see my brother. Hasn't been to dine with us for three Sundays running. He's worse, confined to his bed. I want to see him and . . . Mr. Johnnie.'

He felt the need of a man, a brother . . . a Gregory.

CHAPTER VII

JOSEPH MAKES AN ENTRY

MILLY in the Homestead doorway rolled her eyes and confirmed Martin's information. 'Mistah Joseph was always in bed now . . . he was failin'. But, oh, yes, sah, he could suht'nly see Mistah Martin. Please to step in. Mistah John would be home in about half an hour from the city. Missus was out with Joey in the town.' She'd 'jes' run up.' Martin stood waiting in the hall. Joseph and he had played 'Wolf, Wolf,' around that corner and hide-and-go-seek all up and down the stairs. At his elbow was the closed study door behind which his father had whipped them both. He could feel his mother's consolation kisses now, above the smart. Johnnie had been brought up by the same method, without a mother's consolation, poor little chap! But it had worked out very well. Nicholas had always been considered brilliant, but the real man was John, not a sensational success, but solid, steady, dutiful.

Standing in the shadows of the old dark hall into which a perfume of lilacs stole from the bushes near the door, Martin for the first time in his ruddy active life felt the chill conviction of old age, of dusk, the end of things . . . an ashen feeling . . . cold. He had gone farther down than he knew: his achievements, his successes, accomplishment, lay there behind him. From now on he must wear the mask that hides the face of death, that gray bone thing full of dark holes. Martin had not thought of death before. Nor of old age. Joseph, of course, had always seemed old, had been born old, a little old anxious man in knickerbockers, afraid of this and that, but he, Martin, had been so busy wanting and satisfying his wants, making his 'pile' and building Carrie's palace and getting those two beautiful children educated and started and settled in life, and fighting off the encroachments

of other men busy collecting a pile of their own, that he hadn't had time to be anything but young.

Martin blew out his breath and sat down on one of the Chippendale chairs Caroline had always coveted. He was tired. He'd lived at top pressure now for fifty-five years . . . well, he felt as if the business had started in his cradle. He supposed he'd go on . . . working. It was habit. But the zest was out of it, the 'punch,' the purpose . . . Nicholas. He drooped forward against his cane. This hard ache in his heart . . . Nicholas had planted a blow there whose bruise would last him for the rest of his days . . .

'Mistah Gregory, he say fo' Mistah Gregory come up, please.'

Joseph sat against high pillows in the big faded room his father and mother had slept in and which he and Sarah had shared for the few quiet years of their union. His narrow face looked lined and yellow, saffron . . . great purplish pouches hung from his lower lids. The face creased to a smile as he held out his weak dark hand, curiously clean and bloodless, to his brother. It had neither the warmth nor the coldness of human flesh. It was like wood . . . a little bundle of thin reeds.

'Glad to see you, Mart. I've missed our Sundays. Sorry they sent you away when you were here . . . last week, but . . . er . . . that is, it seems to me . . . I was asleep, wasn't I? Or something. They might have waked me up. I'd have been glad to see you.'

'Better get your naps when you can, Jo. Help you to get well.'

'Oh . . . well . . . yes . . . as to that . . . I don't know.' He stared ahead of him. 'It's a queer illness . . . queer. I'm better . . . and then I'm worse. Not that it matters much. I mean . . . we've all got to expect it, Martin. How's Carrie? She was in on Wednesday . . . looked rather seedy, that is . . .'

'Yes. She worries.'

'She always did,' Jo sighed. 'Carrie's a great worrier.'

Well, it seems to me . . . children are a great care . . . a perpetual anxiety . . . and grandchildren. This boy of John's . . .'

'Look here, Jo, I've been bothered myself.'

A queer flash of gloomy excitement crossed Jo's face and he betrayed a glow of sad fraternal justification. If Martin were in trouble . . . at last . . . he, Jo, would stand by him. He'd always said the boy wasn't sound . . . rash . . . He and his father had worried over it.

Martin spoke again. 'Is Johnnie contented where he is?'

This was not the expected opening. The glow faded and Jo's mournful eyes clouded over to their habitual apprehensive dullness. 'Well . . . he's bound to be satisfied . . . I mean . . . it's as much as he could expect. He's a very good boy. He means well, but, between you and me, Martin, he's not brilliant. He'll never set the Hudson River afire.'

'Oh . . . Brilliance!' Martin sighed and both men remained in contemplation as though a bubble floated above them silently and burst.

'It's not what I'm looking for . . .' He waited. 'Nicholas has quit.'

Again Jo's eyes lit up. 'You don't mean to say . . . left the rubber factory? Some other opening? In New York?'

Martin nervously crossed his legs. He was seated in a low wicker chair between Jo's bed and the window and a small table covered with medicine bottles stood at his elbow. In changing his position, he knocked over one of these and now he rearranged them in a careful row. The bottles clicked.

'Why . . . n-no. He's got a bee in his bonnet. He's interested in . . . a line of . . . research . . . study. I don't get it myself. I didn't go to college. It's a student's subject . . . rather.'

'Very surprising,' said Joseph. 'Not at all . . . I mean . . . what I'd have thought of Nicholas. It seems to me . . . that is . . . always such a . . . well, young man about town, wasn't he?'

Martin, in spite of himself, grinned. 'Not for the past few years, Jo. He's been almost a recluse.'

'Oh, to be sure . . . since Barbara's death. Tchh! Tchh! Probably that started him off, Martin. Study would be . . . it seems to me . . . perhaps . . . a refuge.'

Martin sat brooding. He wondered if perhaps Jo hadn't hit upon it. Perhaps that time with its strain and shock and still rigid endurance might really have affected the boy's brain. He sighed heavily, impatiently.

'I don't know, Jo, maybe you're right. I never did understand Nicholas. He's not like Johnnie . . . Little John.'

'No . . . no.' And Jo sighed as heavily as Martin. 'John has never been at all — er — difficult to understand.'

'See here, old man . . . I've got to have a Gregory in the concern and I am wondering if your John would consider coming in with me.'

Joseph raised himself until it seemed to Martin he was stretching up, long and thin as a bone, straight to the ceiling. His brows lifted, moving the black skull cap on his head, and his face lengthened interminably.

'Er . . . what's that? What's that you say?'

'Nicholas's leaving me. If he wanted to come now, I wouldn't take him back. That's settled. He's out. Well, I've got nobody to take his place. There are men of ability, of course, of experience . . . with capital, but I want, in the firm, a youngster of my own name and blood, somebody with the Gregory tradition' (Martin had not the remotest idea what the Gregory tradition was, but he and Joseph had always been solemn over it), 'who will carry out my own schemes, my own ideas, and be — well, fond of me, you know. There's already brains and brilliance there. I can put my hand on 'em. I've got a sort of silent partner who is bound to be a chief executive in time, but he's not . . . what I'm looking for to take Nicholas's place. I want a gentleman, a solid steady reliable chap who will start in and learn the ropes and uphold the tradition of the concern . . .' (this tradition, if recent, was real enough) 'and . . . sort of . . . act like a balancing wheel, d'ye see? Somebody I can teach and train and then be sure he'll keep on in the same road. He

don't have to be brilliant, a genius . . . I've got a man like that. I mean to use him, push him, back him up for all I'm worth . . .' A sudden great red rush of color to Martin's forehead bore witness to the queer choking rush of smothered gratitude, of paternity and pride he felt towards Tom Devinney. 'But there's a reason why this man I speak of can't take Nicholas's place. I want a Gregory and a gentleman, some one sufficiently detached from the interests of the laborer *per se*. Let me have John.'

Joseph had shrunk down again. He was breathing rapidly and very audibly and his hands moved.

'As . . . as . . . you mean . . . in the rubber business?'

'In the whole thing. We'll start him on five thousand dollars a year and let him learn the ropes. If it goes all right . . . he's a good boy . . . I'm fond of him . . . always was . . . Little John, something about him . . . and I like his wife, Lydia. He's got a son . . . it goes on, you see . . . Why, then we'll quietly tuck him in as junior partner and he can have Nicholas's ten thousand a year and — and' — Martin's voice cracked — 'and all the rest of it.'

He got up and went over to a window. He didn't want Jo to see the convulsion of his face. 'All the rest of it . . .' that belonged to Nicholas, his tenderness, his long long patience, his tolerance, his unchanging kindness, his fatherliness . . . Nicholas had gone to find God.

'May God the Father punish him,' was Martin's prayer, 'or forgive him, if He likes . . . I can't.'

'I won't wait for Johnnie,' he muttered. 'You can tell him. Send him over to the factory to-morrow, or if he can't stay away from Hands's office, let him look me up in the evening to-morrow at home. I'm all in. This thing has knocked me. Besides, you've had enough. You look all in yourself, Jo.'

'I'm . . . I'm . . .' Jo panted; 'it seems to me . . . why, Johnnie will be . . . will have a competence . . .'

'Rather more than that, Jo.'

'I mean,' Joseph whispered, 'a fortune . . .'

He was left, rigid as a golden idol, against his pillows, the lines all faded out of his face.

To him, the anxious man, afraid of Penury, afraid of Expenditure and Loss, had been given a great unexpected Pot of Gold. He felt its weight between his dying knees. Johnnie was safe. His Johnnie . . . Sarah's Little John.

A wave of serenity and peace flooded his cramped mind. He knew that he loved this boy . . . and singing Lydia with her queer dear eyes . . . and that monkey grandson of his, Joseph . . . the future inheritor of all these interests, this wealth, this Pot of Gold. Now, now, he could dare to love them. He wasn't good for very long, himself, he knew that, but it didn't matter. Let death come. His boy was safe . . . if it wasn't too good to be true . . . if Johnnie could make good . . . if . . . if . . . perhaps.

He sat up half the night talking to his bewildered and excited son, a son preoccupied absurdly with compunctions concerning his strange cousin Nicholas . . . and even after talk had been forbidden he would call out to John and have him in and hold his hand and warn and counsel him. 'A great opportunity . . . a chance in a hundred . . . you must make the most of it, my son. Such an opening does not come twice to any man . . .' and then towards morning after a few hours of twitching, restless sleep . . . 'Johnnie,' again, 'Johnnie. My boy, I must warn you about Lydia. She is a darling, but her ideas . . . you know . . . for little Jo. You must be careful. He has a career before him . . . a future. He must be made to take life seriously. He must feel its gravity, its importance. The old way, John, is best. Teach him the old way. Obedience, Duty, Reverence, Thrift . . . they pay, my boy, they pay . . . "And show mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments . . ."' And then, wandering in sheer weakness, he murmured, "'I am the Lord Thy God . . . thou shalt have none other gods but me,"' patting John's hand and looking at a rose-flecked sunrise sky.

He made up his mind with characteristic suddenness to be off at this climactic moment of his life and he did not live to see that sun go down. Little John, anxious, but with no suspicion of the immediacy of the event, left, pale and bewildered by the excitement of the night, for a last explanatory and astounding day at Nathaniel Hands's office, and before he returned to the Homestead, it was vacant of its serious familiar spirit. Lydia had been with Joseph, holding his weak and restless fingers which wanted impatiently, uncertainly, to weave together the last loose threads of life. Lydia's blue eyes seemed to hold him up, to support the life that was in him like two shining hands. Her body sheltered his spirit's flickering from the near wind of death. She wanted to win from him a confession of courage or of resignation. This anxious seeking restlessness oppressed her terribly.

'You've been happy, haven't you, Father? It's been beautiful. Johnnie's loved you so . . . and Joey and I . . .' her tears ran down. 'It's been happy, hasn't it? . . . lovely . . . your wife . . . ?'

This word was part of Joseph and towards it he managed to turn his head and move his fading eyes. He half lifted a hand to his throat in order to rid himself of the rattling obstruction to his breath. Perhaps he saw Lydia's lovely and tender face, begging for some confession, some rendering account of joy. At any rate, all the life left in him gathered itself together at her calling of that name, raised itself, came through. He smiled. The beauty of his serious simplicity, of his anxious loyalty, of the earnestness of him, gave witness in that smile.

'Yes . . . beautiful . . . happy . . . Sarah . . . John . . .' he said.

It was Lydia's triumph. With the help of her courage the truth was out: through all the mournful and anxious days of that willfully shadowed life of his, he had been happy, safe . . . beloved.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEATH OF FEAR

KAATERSKILL said: that Julius had forced young Nicholas Gregory to marry Hesther Anne, that Martin had thrown him, for his sins, out of the company and had threatened him with disinheritance if he did not make to Hunt's daughter his belated dishonorable amends. It said that in revenge for these coercions Nicholas had withdrawn in sulky indignity to his little farmhouse, his own property up there on the mountain-side. Creek Kaaterskill said that Hesther had trusted Nicholas and had been deceived. Gissing's, remembering Bessie Devinney and perhaps some mistier and half-mythological county history, said that the Bittering blood was at its tricks again. Julius Hunt and Caroline Gregory grew to a strange gray resemblance of pinched pride that summer while, through talk and whispers, pity and disgust, walked Hesther with her face of a soft June-contented rose. She had had her fortnight's magic with Nicholas beside a southern sea and she had now that promise of love and life fulfilled.

To and fro, when she walked in the evenings, tranquil, composed, ready with her smiling, Tom Devinney went beside her, grim and silent, his lip lifted like a hound's against any comments that might afflict her hearing in the streets or lanes. But she was greatly loved and the Gissing's and Creek Kaaterskill people needed no snarls of young Devinney's to keep their tongues quiet in her hearing. Only . . . their eyes pitied her, and by Tom that was hardly to be endured. The young ruddy working-man grew gaunt, his solid flesh eaten away by his pain and jealousy and hate. He knew, for Hesther herself had told him, that this adventure had been her own desire, that she herself had given Nicholas his dismissal, but Tom held Nicholas a monster for his ac-

quiescence. If a man gives a woman as much as that, he should give her everything . . . even if she tells him no . . . So Tom, expressing himself to Hesther, to her father and her stepmother, and to any one else willing to listen to him.

That Hesther had her husband's name and his support, the recognition of his people, who came in motors and took her back and forth from Rosewreath to her father's home, that she and her child would have all Gregory assistance and acknowledgment, was common knowledge, but Nicholas's rôle was incomprehensible . . . and therefore hateful. No explanation explained except the dark resolvment of super-human villainy. Up there on the hillside his house became, to imaginations hungry for color, for marvel, a place of secret vice, of rendezvous . . . even Kaaterskill must borrow from the Latins when it explains an Anglo-Saxon sin . . . stories of veiled ladies and humming nocturnal motor-cars from New York City . . . no virgin could walk with safety, for Nicholas, in the Kaaterskill Mountain woods, children believed in werewolves and the evil eye, 'he' was drinking himself to death, 'he' was a madman, singing and talking to himself. The Italian grocer's boy who carried up supplies wore a silver hunchback on his neck, and greeted with a secret sign the slim bright-eyed gentleman when he came down the path to get his basket and to pay his debt.

The Gregory 'up there' looks as happy as a madman, ran report; he comes whistling, without noise of footsteps in his rubber shoes, his collar open, no hat; sometimes he has a book under his arm, his hair has gone gray, but he has red cheeks like a girl. He raises honey in the old beehives . . . 'up there' . . . and has his chickens and a cow; he has made himself a swimming-pool by damming up the mountain stream, bathes there early in the morning singing like a mocking-bird. He churns his own butter . . . 'up there' . . . cooks his own food, chops his own wood, and has made a map of stars. He'll sing and sing . . . in foreign tongues, Italian, German . . . love-songs . . .

‘Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt . . .’

or

‘The sea, the sea hath its pearls,
And the sky, its stars,
But my heart, my heart, my heart hath its love . . .’

Oh, in all certainty, a mad devil, a mad prince of devils.

They pitied Martin, were glad to pity him. Money isn't everything, they said; even the rich and the successful aren't always happy neither. Of the two young Gregorys, after all, John, they judged, was the better man. No doubt of that, owing, probably, to that golden, friendly wife of his. And he had a 'real kid' too. Young Joseph kept Kaaterskill, for all its troubles, laughing with his tricks and words and ways.

But John, successful John himself, grew less and less inclined to laugh with Lydia and the rest of Kaaterskill at little Jo. His father's last words had been a warning. Little John, serious, mournful, tender, putting up in Saint Matthew's Church a twin stained-glass window, 'sacred to the memory of Joseph Israel Gregory who passed away,' etc. . . . Little John, resolute to walk in his father's steps 'unto the third and fourth generation of them that love me and keep my commandments,' frightened to the fearful soul of him by the icy splendors of Nicholas's intrepidity, John, so scared and sobered and tamed by good fortune and ill, took upon his young shoulders, more and more shroudingly, the mantle of Joseph Gregory and sat in sad-eyed censorship upon his home.

Lydia tried to convince herself that it was a natural grief for Joseph's death, that it would pass. She did not love the sadness, nor the fear, nor the censorship of John, greatly, increasingly as she loved his tenderness and truth and loyalty and his great love for her . . . his Little Johnness, and she could not bear to have the rainbows frowned out of her life, and, as for Joey's dimples, she became a tigress in their defense.

In August of that year, there occurred at the Gregory Homestead a visit from Rick Mercer . . . with consequences. He was not invited . . . no more than the Serpent into the Garden of Eden . . . but with the inevitability of unforeseen tragedy, he came. Jacob Crool brought him in a cloud of gnats and gossip, and set him down in a murky sunset light by the door with his big fat valise.

Inside the house, Joey, freed forever from Grandpa's interference, was prodigally teasing Hooker. One could hear the spirit-broken bird squalling distractedly . . . 'I am a jealous God . . . Oh, Johnnie, Johnnie . . . I say, Johnnie . . . I am a jealous God . . .'

Rick stood there in the murky sunshine just above the larch-tree shadows in the porch, laughing like a little devil, doubled up with laughter. He set his two long hands on the lower half of the Dutch door and cackled in his high rickety key, 'Tell me, you Joey, what d'ye think of God by this time . . . eh?'

Joey ran out quickly, dimples and monkeys all alive and a twig in his right hand. He was never surprised at any event, was Joey. At sight of Rick, 'He's howid,' said Joey, 'I fink . . . nasty old bird.'

Rick squalled like Hooker at this, rubbing up the spiked ends of his Mephistophelian mustache. 'I believe you really think Hooker is God, eh, Joey?'

Joey looked solemn, chop-fallen. 'Why . . . ain't he, sort of, Cousin Rick? He *says* he is.'

The text, this, repeated with embellishments by Rick, of a long serious talk that evening between John Gregory and his son, in Joey's room, Joey in his cot, looking perversely cryptic, secrets in his dimples and an all evening's encouragement in deviltry by Cousin Rick intoxicating the golden monkeys beyond any sobering of Sandman or Papa.

'I can't believe you were in earnest, Joey. I'm sure you know better than that. Mamma has taught you how to say your prayers . . . "Our Father Who art in Heaven . . ."'

'O-ooo, *that* God,' said Joey, rocking, his arms about his knees.

'But there is only one God, your Heavenly Father, Joey?'

'Two fathers, Daddy . . . uh?'

'Listen to me, Jo. I'm talking seriously. Sit still. There is a very solemn and awful commandment . . . "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain."'

'How d'ye mean, Papa? Name-in-vain . . . name-in-vain . . . name-in-vain?'

'Making fun, joking, chattering thoughtlessly about God, Jo.'

'Like Hooker?'

'Yes . . . if Hooker were a human being with a soul.'

'Like Cousin Rick?'

'Yes . . . very much like Cousin Rick.'

'What will God do to Cousin Rick . . . ? the Heavenly Father one . . . ?'

'He will not hold him guiltless, Joey, we may be sure of that.'

'Mummy says there isn't any Devil . . . nor any Hell.'

'Mummy doesn't know anything about it, Jo.'

'Does you?'

'Listen to me, Jo, the Bible tells us . . . ' But in the middle of his father's long hesitant exhortation, carefully arranged in words of one syllable, suddenly, dimples and monkeys both extinguished, Joey slept.

Lydia stood laughing over him. 'Do you think you put the fear of God into him that time, Little John?' she whispered, wicked and sidelong and very tender.

John rose, stern and pale. He was tired from his day at the rubber factory under his new and driving master, Martin Gregory, tired too with the compunction and regret which never ceased to dog him for the sake of Nicholas. Unsmiling he held up his father's long condemning finger at his wife.

'The next time Joey makes a jest of God, I'll whip him,' he said, and Lydia's face, smiling sideways at the sleeper, flushed.

'Oh, no,' she breathed, 'not little Joey, dear. He's too little and too sensitive.' She put her arms round John and kissed him. 'He does look so exactly like you, Johnnie, when he's asleep. He's part of you . . . and part of me . . . Isn't it strange . . . and wonderful . . . ? stranger than . . . God . . . and sweeter too, I think.'

Two or three irritating days later Rick left and, as usual, after his departure, Joey was put to bed.

Little John, returning that night from the factory, had to wait for his kiss from Lydia. She was having difficulty with her son. Johnnie, in his bedroom getting out of his coat and soiled shirt, and into his dressing-gown, listened more and more gravely to the altercation in Joey's small adjoining chamber. Lydia had called, 'Wait a sec, John. I'll be out. Don't come in yet. He's as nervous as a cat, poor lamb! . . . feverish. Rick took his temperature for me . . . he's above normal. I think it's indigestion.'

John's fagged face went into its straightest Gregory lines and the softness of his eyes set ominously. 'Damn that thermometer,' he muttered. 'Joey knows just when to work up a temperature. Of course he's above normal in this heat.'

' . . . Hush, Joey, you must let me put you to bed, darling. You wouldn't kick your Mummy, dearest, surely. No gentleman would ever kick his Mummy, Joey. Joey . . . ' this almost in despair, 'I'll have to call Papa.'

'Papa's jealous and mean like howid God,' said Joey in a bad high voice, the wicked snarling key of Cousin Rick.

John felt the blood rise slowly up to his face and head. He put on his wrapper and walked hastily downstairs. He mustn't do anything in anger, without due thought. Joey's words had hurt his tenderness as even a child's can: thoughtless they were, but sharp as little knives . . . 'Papa is jealous and mean like howid God.'

In the dim study, shrouded from twilight, John went prowling to and fro.

'Thou shalt have none other gods but me,' drowsily prompted Hooker from his corner.

'My father punished me and I loved and feared him,' thought Little John. 'I must not be a coward. He warned me. Lydia will ruin Jo, body and soul, body and soul. He'll thank me for it in the end . . . "Unto the third and fourth generation of them that love me and keep my commandments" . . . Help me to do my duty to my son, Almighty God,' prayed John Gregory.

Having come to the decision, he took up his father's ruler from the desk and went upstairs.

By this time Joey had kicked Lydia with both bare feet and she was flushed with unavailing effort to get him into bed. She came out, rather desperate, in search of Little John, but when she met his pale set face and his ruler in their bedroom, the purpose of her coming changed.

'What are you going to do, Johnnie? He's sick.'

'Lydia, I am going to whip Joey. I promised him a whipping if he took the name of God in vain and I am going to keep my word.'

'Oh, no,' said Lydia, 'you're not. He has a temperature.'

'Rot,' said John, laughing shortly. 'Rick Mercer taught him that trick. A good whipping will cure that temperature. I know it . . . it's a tantrum temperature. He needs a mustard plaster in the right spot . . .'

He passed Lydia, thrust her gently aside, and went into Joey's room, locking the door in her astonished face. Then she believed in his intention and was beside herself with grief and fear. She beat against the door, crying, 'Johnnie, Johnnie, don't. Please don't. It's indigestion. He's really sick.'

Joey did not look sick. His face was like a poppy and he leapt up and down on his bed, his eyes ablaze with anger and with revolution.

'Jo,' said his father, 'you took the name of God in vain and I am going to whip you.'

After one incredulous and insulting 'Hoo!' Joey set up a furious howling, 'Marmee . . . Marmee . . . come quick . . .!'

John, remembering his father, took him and beat him

with the ruler very mercifully. Each light blow struck his own memory heavily so that he winced. Joey's screams drowned even Lydia's . . . even her beating on the door.

As John came out, he was conscious, as she darted past him to Joey, of whiteness and blue flames . . . Lydia's face and eyes.

We all know, all of us know too well, the bitter and sudden horror of which life is capable, the awful keenness of its unexpected agonies. Such weapons are not for art to play with, but since the promise of John's soul could never have been fulfilled without life's cruel assistance, the reporter must report his history, letting, with an intimate and indescribable reluctance, reality tear through the flimsy paper of the chronicle disfiguringly.

John went downstairs, shaking and cold, put the ruler back on Joseph's desk and rubbed the red mark on his right hand. He was miserable, anxious, scared. Above, dimly, went on the noise of howling.

In a few minutes, footsteps began hurrying, water rushed into a bathtub, some one ran down the steps, Milly with her disastrous black and white eyes appeared in the study door. 'Oh, Mistah John, suh, you mus' go get de doctor quick for Joey. He don' got convulshuns. Please to hurry, suh, he's bad.'

When within half an hour the doctor came, he gave his diagnosis: an acute attack of indigestion or perhaps some one of the usual illnesses of childhood, checked, by a cold, from its normal manifestations and driven dangerously inward. Lydia could not listen to his reasons. Together, she and the doctor worked over Joey until morning. The child passed from one convulsion to another. At daybreak, John, summoned from below, incredulous and icy, stood beside him and touched his cheek and hand.

Lydia knelt with her head shrouded in the covers, over one of those little hands she meant to warm. When John touched her, she shuddered, but did not look up. Presently, 'Leave us alone, won't you?' she said in a voice quite different from her own. 'You killed him.'

Milly, for decency's sake, had shut Hooker up into the south parlor until the heart-breaking ceremony of Joey's funeral should be over, and to this room, unaware of any living companion, came Little John when Lydia had left him. From the moment of Joey's death she had not looked at her husband nor let him touch her, and, as soon as the burial was done, she left in Jacob Crool's surrey to take a train to her father's southern home. John Gregory, wincing under the eyes of Milly and of Jacob, came out into the porch and bade her a dull good-bye. She stood in black, perfectly still and numb, while, shuddering violently, visibly, he kissed her on a cheek which did not change its dead whiteness under his cold lips. He knew that she was not coming back.

Before the surrey, trundling under the larches, had left the Homestead gate, John went into the house, which smelled of heavy white flowers, and passed blindly through his father's study into the secret coolness of the south parlor, closing its door behind him. It would be impossible to exaggerate his agony. A consciousness of irremediable estrangement from all love and mercy froze his heart. He had so loved his little son and he had killed him. The doctor spoke mercifully of other causes, but Lydia said that he had killed him. He so loved Lydia and she had left him. There would be no more love for John Gregory, and for John Gregory, then and always, there was no possible life except in loving and in being loved. He stood just inside the door, looking down. The death he would die without his child . . . and her . . . had begun its gasping gradual progress in his body, in his brain. No man can suffer so unassuaged — and for Little John's curious singleness of nature what assuagement could there be? — without sooner or later wearing through the frail teguments of life. It would be slow and hesitant, *peine fort et dure*, but it would be . . . death. Joey and Lydia, Lydia and Joey . . . they suffered in his heart like two living bodies in a fire. He was them and their pain and their consumer, and he was burning with them . . . Lydia kept saying, 'Leave us alone, won't you? You killed him. Leave us

alone . . . Leave us alone . . . You killed him . . . ' This had been said to him. This had been done by him . . . because of God: God, the Father, Who had sent His own Son to be killed on a cross in torment because otherwise He could not forgive His childish world. God the Father, a jealous God who was angry with little dimpled boys that took His name in vain. 'May God burn forever in His Hell,' prayed Little John. 'May He be cursed with His own cursings. May He suffer as man suffers under His inexorable inhuman Law, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me . . .'

At a little distance down the long darkened room, something with feathers stirred. John's heart missed one faint and anguished beat.

'I am the Lord thy God,' said a voice without human modulation, cold, high, faintly chuckling, superior to finite doubt and weakness. 'Thou shalt have none other gods but me.'

Down the length of the room, John, his face convulsed, blood streaming from his bitten lip, flung himself, tore open the cage, and, grasping Hooker, who had an instant only of magnificent rage, whirled him about and wrung his neck. He flung the silenced mass of fluttered feathers, ash-gray and the color of flame, down to the floor and stretched himself beside them, his brown damp hair touching the limp emerald-crested parrot's head.

He had killed Fear . . . the Fear of God.

CHAPTER IX

TRUTH LIKE A SWORD

It was a warm August afternoon, but in Jacob's surrey Lydia, draped in black, felt cold. She did not think that summer would ever be able to warm her again, Joey's death having iced her blood. She sat jerking with the surrey's movement in the back seat, her dress-suit case beside her, holding the iron support of the surrey-top in one black-gloved hand, the other clenched tightly on her black knee. Every time her eyes recognized that blackness, she realized afresh that Joey was dead. Once or twice fat Jacob had looked over his corduroy shoulder, opened his lips, wiped them with his hand and looked away. Here obviously was a young Fane in no further need of 'trimmin',' Life had seen to that necessary bit of education quite sufficiently, far beyond the limit of any suggestion of a Jacob Crool . . . 'The poor thing! Poor thing!'

They went slowly, jogging, crunching, swinging, the surrey-top rattling faintly, the horse chopping at the ground with his hooves, down past the corner of Maple Lane.

Lydia, having looked at her wrist-watch strapped against the black glove, spoke. 'We're early for the train, Mr. Crool. I don't want to wait in that station. Will you stop here in Maple Lane? I'll go in for a few minutes . . .'

Stephen, she thought, would be over at his laboratory, there would be an empty garden, a chair under the apple tree. She felt faint, and there she might be able to forget Joey for a few minutes, pretending she was a girl again. There were for her no memories of Joey between those yellowish walls . . . and Lydia had forgotten Little John.

She went in through the little low green door and found blue flowers, roses too and balancing bees. The pink house was all open to the sun and as quiet to human hearing as a

deserted hive. Its master was absent, there were no servants, no scientists about. In the wicker chair under the apple tree she laid herself and leaned back and closed her eyes. The tears kept brightening along the tight lids and slipping down while small incessant quiverings tormented her cheeks and lips.

It was August. It smelled so sweet . . . hay out there on the meadows . . . roses . . . roses . . . Joey was gone. Her breast ached for the warm weight of his golden head . . . his dandelion head . . . his little warm dirty hands would pat her cheeks. If she could only stop this body-remembering . . . the feel of him . . . the touch . . . Why had she ever let him creep up into her arms, snuggle against her, kiss her with his face, eyelashes, cheek, nose and chin, trying to see her all the while . . . ? dear gold-brown eyes . . . the eyes of Little John. She stopped thinking . . . feeling . . .

She opened her eyes and saw Stephen standing before her.

'I'm just . . . a ghost . . . in this garden,' she said faintly.

Stephen's pale tight steady face smiled steadily as he fitted on his glasses. 'You're the most familiar ghost my garden has, Lydia. You visit it so often that really when I saw you . . . I wasn't sure . . .' He touched her hand. 'Except . . . my poor dear . . . for all the black. Take off your hat and gloves, won't you? It's so warm to-day.'

'I'm going to take a train South. I'm going to my mother . . . to Papa.'

Stephen straightened. He had been leaning against the arm of her chair, bending over her, ready to take off her hat. He did take it off as he rose and the sun, freckling through the full leaves, touched her young hair.

'You're leaving . . . Little John?' he asked, laid the hat down on his green table, walked away and came back.

Lydia closed her eyes, because something looked like a judge . . . something in the garden. Again the bright web of tears slid down her cheeks.

'I'm leaving him . . . he killed Joey . . . you don't know . . .'

'You're leaving him . . . now?'

'For always. He killed Joey.'

'Don't say that again, Lydia, please. Every time you say that, it makes a channel in your brain.'

'Oh' — Lydia's little laugh was tortured — 'my brain!'

'I know what you think. The doctor told me what happened. Joey was naughty, you couldn't put him to bed. He said something John had promised him a whipping for. He had a fever. John whipped him. He had this sudden illness ...'

Lydia writhed. 'Hush, Stephen.' She put up the black-gloved hands towards her head.

'You and I aren't cowards, are we?' asked Stephen. 'Whatever else they may justly say about us, we're not cowards. We aren't afraid ... like Little John ... of life, of truth.'

Between the two black hands pressing her bright hair, Lydia's eyes looked, blazing blue with pain, at Stephen. She was listening.

'I'm not afraid to tell you the truth ... even now. Nobody else will ... and it takes courage because you won't forgive me. That doesn't matter much. The truth matters. I've been thinking about you, Lydia. I was afraid you might be leaving Little John.'

'And I am leaving him. He killed Joey.'

'So ... since he killed Joey ... you will kill him. He'll die. John can't stand a thing like this. He loves you. He loved Joey. I don't suppose you and I are capable of loving the way Johnnie loves. It's all there is of him. Look at his eyes. I've seen him looking at you and Joey. He's a quitter too. He runs away ... college ... life. He'll quit. I don't know how ... but he'll get some illness to do the trick for him. And since you want, more than anything else in the world, to find Joey again, and since John *is* Joey ... all there is of him ... you'll lose your chance of holding Joey again in your arms.'

She was trying to stand up and go, but he put his dextrous big heavy hand against her. Stern and scornful was his

truth-seeking face of a scientist, a mere shining sharpened tool to carve out truth.

'And here's another fact . . . this is where you begin to hate me, Lydia . . . that it was you, as much as John, who killed Joey. He was a nervous spoiled baby, couldn't control himself, fits of tears and temper, hysteria . . . I've seen him . . . loved him myself . . . ' a quiver of the keen tool here, it slipped and hurt. Lydia flinched with him. 'He'd work up a temperature rather than do what he was told. Very well. A whipping doesn't kill a normal child, not the sort of whipping Little John would give Joey . . . even if he has a temperature. And you and he had faked that temperature often enough for John to be justified in his incredulity. John was whipped, wasn't he? I've been whipped myself . . . brutally . . . by Cousin Joseph with that ruler. We didn't die. If Joey really was too sensitive, too tender, too nerve-jangled, if his illness was really caused by nervous excitement, which I doubt . . . but if that *was* the case, if he could not bear his own violent habit of reaction, was it only his father's fault? Be honest, Lydia. Be brave.'

Lydia stood up before him and pulled off the two wet black gloves, dropped them to the grass beneath the tree. She stammered pitifully, 'S-say that other thing again, Stephen . . . about finding . . . Joey . . . '

But Stephen was done. This woman whom he loved had come into his garden for consolation . . . and he had given her . . . the truth. His face was wrenched, eyes clouded, lips stretched past motion. He merely looked at her through the cloud and fumbled with his glasses on their cord.

'I don't know,' she said, 'perhaps I can forgive you . . . you are very cruel. There are truths that oughtn't to be said . . . but I think you are right. I am going back to Little John . . . to find . . . my Joey . . . with him . . . '

She ran over the grass, the green door swung and clapped.

The garden was empty of everything but flowers and bees . . . two crumpled black gloves . . . and ghosts.

CHAPTER X

THE END OF FAITH

STEPHEN fell into the habit of walking up Kaaterskill Mountain once or twice a week to visit Nicholas. By tacit agreement there was never any discussion of religious problems between the two friends so that Stephen was able to enjoy like a breath of sharp blue air the brilliant sword-like gayety of this 'madman.' Nicholas sang and laughed, listened to tales of Kaaterskill, of science and the world, and together the two young men smoked, chopped wood, cooked meals, and tended bees . . . or simply lay sprawled out on the old warm sun-soaked boards of that little porch on the edge of the world, and dozed or dreamed . . . or pondered.

Stephen, at such moments, his own face hidden, would covertly watch Nicholas's . . . a thin face, tanned, chin propped on hands, pipe caught in teeth, eyes shining, waiting, possessed by space and stars. Lord! but this man is happy, Stephen thought, happier than any human has a right to be. Stephen, perverse, wanted to tell him horrors, dirty facts about life, vile things of disease and pain and lust. He couldn't . . . as well gossip with an archangel. But . . . there was Hesther, wasn't there? and did the archangel deserve his raptures? To Stephen's way of thinking . . . hardly. It was all an experiment in spiritual drug-taking, a dissipation, a piece of cowardice, self-indulgence, an escape. Only . . . he loved Nicholas, and happiness is a rare flower, and, when he went down to his laboratory trying to do man a service there, some inch-worm service towards release from pain, he felt intoxicated himself with mountain air and . . . Nicholas. After all, he would say to himself, Hesther Anne was what she wanted to be, she's only an insignificant little mother-thing. This magnificent Nicholas

is as wicked as Lucifer, perhaps, but as rare. Just as an experiment, he's worth a thousand Hesther Annes.

In December, without its father's cognizance, there was born to that insignificant mother-thing, Hesther Anne, the child of Nicholas.

All through the fine frosty night, webbed with stars, Tom Devinney went tramping about the little Gissing's house in crisp glazed shallow snow, or sat downstairs in the parlor, head clutched, Julius walking up and down before him, and listened to the rare brave cries of Hesther in the little room from which had been banished all 'bitterness and wrath and clamor and evil-speaking, with all malice.' Tom suffered as a jealous lover. His body was torn and his mind. He did not know whether love or hate was the more painful, but, when morning came and Bessie whispered down the stairs, 'It's all right . . . Tom. A boy. She's *fine*,' Tom stumbled out, swearing and cursing, with tears pouring down his cheeks.

When the tears were dry and he grimly composed, he sought out two or three of his intimates, his henchmen. There was something, it seemed, Tom had a mind to do and he wouldn't be averse to a little muscular and moral support. It was not so much a personal matter, he explained, as an act of public justice . . . punishment.

When the Italian grocer's boy, starting loathfully enough up the slippery rough trail with Nicholas Gregory's basket on his arm, met a group of big young working-men at the far side of the bridge, he was willing to surrender his business to them and to take a coin or two in exchange. He offered to lend them his silver hunchback, but they were not afraid of the evil eye, it appeared, and had other weapons of their own.

They went laughing up the trail in the gay December sunshine: the bare trees scrawled hieroglyphics against their path, made violet confusion of shadow besides, with tracks of birds and squirrels, over the thin blue snow.

'He comes to the turn here to meet Nello. Set down the

basket and step back, boys, so's he won't catch sight of us . . . before he's within reach.'

They stood, turning up their collars, warming their hands in their pockets, Tom gray and grim, his eyes sunk into deep blackened sockets, his whole face black and white with hate and weariness.

Presently they heard footsteps crunching and a voice like the still, haunted winter morning began to sing . . .

'As pants the wearied hart for cooling springs
That sinks exhausted in the summer chase
So thirsts my soul for Thee, Great King of kings,
So longs to reach Thy secret dwelling-place . . .'

Tom's lips stretched in a bloodless grin showing his locked teeth.

Through the trees they could now see Nicholas, white as a Pierrot astray in winter woods, his white sweater pulled up to his ears, heavy white flannel trousers, old and stained, bareheaded, a book under his arm, looking past their trees out across the world beyond them . . . singing. But when he came round the bend in the trail and met them, his song stopped. He stood looking at them, the basket at their feet, their rope and whip, Tom's bloodless grin. Nicholas's face grew still and he walked slowly close to them and looked across their eyes.

'Hesther Anne had her baby last night,' said Tom through that unchanged grin. 'We've come to speak to you. We've come to tell you what we think of wife-deserters. She suffered. We've come to give you your share. We mean to tell you what we think in something stronger than words . . . write it down on you, we will.'

Nicholas stepped back against a tree with the sun in his face. His eyes glittered.

'Hesther . . . ?' he asked, and Tom, waving back his followers, plunged towards him, lashing out. Nicholas's face lit up for battle, but, as the two men closed, that son of Martin's lawful union had a strange feeling that he was fighting with . . . himself.

It was one of Stephen's days and he came up from Kaaterskill that afternoon by the road as usual. He reached Nicholas's golden temple at four o'clock and waited for an hour. Then wondering changed gradually to uneasiness. It was getting dark. He called. Nothing but the mountain answered and that faintly.

In any case, it was time to start down . . . almost dark, except for the white help of the snow.

He took the Creek Kaaterskill short cut, the trail, and, after a hundred steps or so, came upon Nicholas lying beside his basket of provisions on the reddened pallor of the ground.

'I thought you'd be along,' Nicholas muttered, looking up at him with the eyes of a sleepless patient child, ' . . . good Samaritan . . .'

The sweater had been torn from him and scattered about like fleece amongst the leafless bushes.

'I'm cold,' Nicholas moaned.

As Stephen bent over him swearing, sick, he added hastily: 'Don't move me. My hip's smashed. One of them did it with his boots . . . kicked . . . I don't know . . .' He was gone for a minute, grayer than the snow, but came back to say without opening his eyes, 'I don't know their names . . . I don't know any of them . . . strangers . . . Tell father that. If I get delirious and talk . . . it isn't reality. They were just . . . fellows . . . I don't know . . . brothers . . .' He smiled, grayer and with the closed eyes, 'I was on their side, Stephen, you know . . . How is Hesther . . . ? They wouldn't tell me . . . that.'

Stephen with journeys to and fro, with whiskey and with blankets over and under, and bandages improvised, got him out of that swift mill-race towards death, but had to leave him under the stars to go back to Kaaterskill for help. By that time Nicholas was delirious, but not telling his 'brothers' names. He chattered about a good many other things and sang in a half-voice college songs, lying alone there in his agony.

The stars uttered their speech and showed their knowledge, captured for him in a wizard net of crooked branches. He wanted to set them all free . . . like little sparkling boats. That bothered him . . . that and the pain . . . he wished Stephen had stopped for that . . . to set them all sparkling free.

On a stretcher six men carried him down the trail and he was taken to Stephen's house in Maple Lane. A doctor had come up the mountain and had given him an anæsthetic before they lifted him.

The hip was broken. As for the other injuries . . . 'The cold . . . snow against the cuts, kept him from losing much blood,' said the doctor. 'He may escape pneumonia. Shock, of course . . . he'll never be the man he was . . . if he gets well . . . lame . . . almost certainly . . .'

Nicholas, his hip in a plaster cast, lay in the room that had once been Lydia's, looking at her view of away and afar down the river where a blue point of land ran out into a blue arc of water and of sky. Here his family came to show mercy and forgiveness to him: Martin, red, breathing heavily, his eyes unhappy, unconvinced, sat beside the bed with his big blunt hands lying on his knees, their finger-tips turned up . . . like empty bowls. Caroline came, crying as a baby cries for a broken toy, Angela for curiosity pricking him once or twice with the black, contemptuous glitter of her eyes, Little John trying hard to understand, Lydia in a rage with the world's cruelty . . . why can't they let other people do what they like? Why must they judge and judge and judge? If they took just that one word of Christ's . . . even forgetting all the rest . . . and followed it — 'JUDGE NOT' — wouldn't the world be better at once . . . ? that was *her* 'ideal' . . .

Stephen hovering about, silent, smoking, fumbling for his glasses, wondered what Nicholas thought of them all, and how, lying there broken and torn and helpless, his pride endured them. He kept wonderfully his look of shining detachment, his smile defended him . . . the translucent

brilliance of his eyes. But he had never seemed, to the man who loved him and who suffered for him, so mysterious. Stephen's tenderness was baffled and perplexed. What was the secret of this beaten man's security, his ease?

Last, after several weeks, in Martin's automobile from Rosewreath, came pale steady Hesther Anne, who, smiling, laid a small creature beside Nicholas on the bed.

It had its fist in its mouth and it looked unseeingly, gravely into Nicholas's face. He had turned as far as he possibly could to see it.

'His eyes are like yours, Hesther . . . black all round the edges.'

After saying this, Nicholas's smile went out and he fell back on his pillow, laying a hand across his face. Below the hand his mouth trembled.

'I don't want him to — hate me, Hesther,' he said.

Hesther laughed, bending over them both. 'Long before he's old enough to hate, Nicholas, you'll have come down from your mountain to him and me. You'll have found God and you'll know His name . . . it's Love.' Hesther repeated it like a sure charm . . . 'Love.'

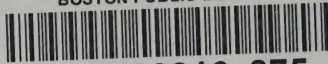
Nicholas let fall then the hand from across his eyes and snatched at Hesther's hanging near him. He held it, looking up. Hesther saw a transfiguration. The hand around hers was only too pitifully the hand of a weakened body, the eyes were wet: nevertheless, through the tears and the brokenness streamed joy, strength, a laughing beauty, a force, near as mirth, infinite as blue ether . . . something which used Nicholas's weakness, his surrender of self and life, as a medium, a tool. He had — she saw it and trembled — come into contact with power and glory. It ran through him into her fingers . . . it radiated from his thin face and his blind tear-dazzled eyes.

She was made one with it. Faith went away, grew small and futile, died. Her God of Love and of forgiveness seemed to pass, to melt into the casual freedom of Nicholas's Intimate. She and he and the child were unified, lovers, part of

an omnipotent immortal *living* which was themselves, and their love freed from themselves and from their love. Hester for an instant understood and, without faith, believed. Nicholas did not need to speak to her. Like him . . . she *knew that it was God*.

THE END

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